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Properly Attired, Hired, or Fired:
Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

Kjerstin Elmen-Gruys

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Properly Attired, Hired, or Fired: Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality

By

Kjerstin Elmen-Gruys

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Abigail Saguy, Chair

This dissertation examines the relationship between physical appearance and social inequality, exploring how workplace demands for “aesthetic labor” reproduce and legitimize workplace discrimination on the bases of gender, race, class, and body size. The term, aesthetic labor, refers to organizational expectations for workers’ attractiveness, style, and interactional mannerisms. These expectations - both formal and informal - influence which people will be hired to do what jobs and how people are expected to look and behave at work, a process that favors workers from more privileged backgrounds. I examine this understudied aspect of labor market inequality in three complementary cases studies, each centering on a different phase of a worker’s career: during the job search, at the point of hire, and when establishing job security.

Chapter 1 is a participant observation and interview study of a non-profit organization that provides professional clothing and style advice to disadvantaged women entering the workforce. My analyses focus on service interactions between volunteer personal stylists and job seekers. I found that interactions were structured by organizational understandings of deserving

versus undeserving poor, through which clients were reputed to be more or less difficult, and more or less deserving.

Chapter 3 draws on the case of female “fit models,” i.e., fashion workers with supposedly “perfect measurements” who try on prototype garments during the clothing production process. Because the work of a fit model only requires perfect bodily measurements (at least in theory), this case provides analytic leverage for unteasing the bodily vs. interactional elements of aesthetic labor. I interviewed fit models and their coworkers, and then compared these accounts with information from 77 job advertisements for fit models. I found that, although a fit model’s bodily measurements were necessary at the point of hire, her job security ultimately depended on her ability to interact congenially and professionally with colleagues. This illustrates that even in jobs with seemingly exacting aesthetic standards, having the appropriate interactional dispositions, or *habitus*, can protect workers when their bodily capital diminishes.

Chapter 4 is an ethnographic examination of service interactions in a women’s “plus-size” clothing store. This research draws on the unique experiences of plus-sized women to examine how service interactions are shaped by mainstream beauty standards, body-accepting branding, and customers’ diverse feelings about body size. Despite branding that promoted prideful appreciation for “real” bodies, the influence of these body-accepting discourses was constrained by women’s internalization of mainstream fat stigma. This resulted in an environment characterized by deep ambivalence toward larger body size, allowing hierarchies between women to be reified rather than dissolved.

The dissertation of Kjerstin Elmen-Gruys is approved.

Hannah Landecker

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2014

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Introduction:

Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality

Feminist scholars interested in labor market inequality and embodiment have built upon Arlie Hochschild's (1983) classic study of emotional labor to illustrate that – in addition to workers' feelings – workers' *bodies* may also be commodified in the workplace. This research has introduced the concept of “aesthetic labor” (Nickson et al. 2003, Saguy and Gruys 2010, Warhurst et al. 2000, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003, Wolkowitz 2006), noting that workplaces draw on unique gendered, raced, and classed images that shape which workers will be hired to do what jobs, and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job – a process that almost uniformly privileges white, middle-class, and conventionally attractive workers.

Understanding how aesthetic expectations channel women and minorities through the labor market is particularly important because appearance-based discrimination is largely without legal recourse. U.S. labor law generally recognizes employers' rights to require workers' aesthetic conformity to their brand image, so long as this does not clearly discriminate against protected categories (Avery and Crain 2007, see also Rhode 2010). Further, although U.S. law protects workers from discrimination on the bases of gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability, and religion, workplace expectations for a certain aesthetic types or styles of workers often map onto these categories in ways that are discriminatory but not protected. As explained by Williams and Connell (2010) in their study of upscale retailers, “In virtually every case, the right aesthetic [for workers to embody] is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white” (p. 350). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker's gender, ethnicity, body type,

or class-imbued dispositions limit her ability to meet a particular organization's aesthetic standards (Williams and Connell 2010, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003).

Through what interactional processes do workplace demands for “aesthetic labor” reproduce and legitimize workplace discrimination on the bases of gender, race/ethnicity, class and body size? How are gendered power relations between workers, managers, and clients negotiated around these aesthetic expectations? Through what social processes do workers attain embodied capacities?

To answer these questions, I examine this pervasive yet understudied aspect of labor market inequality in three complementary cases studies, each centering on a different phase of a worker's career: 1) during the job search, 2) at the point of hire, and 3) when establishing job security. In addition to addressing theoretical gaps in the literature on aesthetic labor, my analyses here move past previous research by foregrounding *body size* as it intersects with gender, race/ethnicity, and class to reproduce social inequalities. This dissertation contributes empirical and theoretical understandings of the body and embodiment as a critical axis of social difference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each empirical chapter contains its own detailed literature review, but all share a common intellectual base, which I outline below. I first provide a general review of the literature on aesthetic labor, including a more detailed discussion in which I propose a new framework for understanding aesthetic labor as a combination of *bodily capital* (Wacquant 1995, Wacquant 2004), *objectified cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986), and *habitus/embodied cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1984, Edgerton and Roberts 2014). I suggest that this conceptualization of aesthetic

labor provides improved analytical leverage for empirical examinations of the ways in which people acquire and use their aesthetic capacities and how these processes relate to social inequality. I then turn to the feminist literature on intersectionality to set the stage for my inclusion of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and body size in my analyses.

Aesthetic Labor and Workplace Inequality

First conceived by Warhurst et al. (2000), the term “aesthetic labor” refers to workers’ “embodied capacities and attributes,” which include “deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness” among other things (Williams and Connell 2010). This list illustrates that aesthetic labor is accomplished through a combination of mannerisms and physical appearance.

Organizations generally prefer to hire workers whose embodied capacities and attributes already conform to their brand image. After hire, employers may continue to refine workers’ embodied dispositions through training in appropriate service styles and/or through rules regulating workplace dress and cosmetic styling. Workers who do not embody brand aesthetics may be relegated to non-visible jobs, or may even be fired.

Early work on aesthetic labor focused primarily on front-line service workers employed in the “style labor market,” (e.g., designer retailers, boutique hotels, high-end restaurants), but recent work finds that managerial concern for workers’ aesthetic appeal extends beyond the realm of interactive service work and also into non-service industries, such as manufacturing and professional work. “Regardless of whether organizations were overtly style-driven or not, workers aesthetic appeal was an important part of the branding and competitive strategy,” (Warhurst et al. 2009). This finding underscores the growing relevance of research examining the relationship between appearance and workplace inequality, and suggests that organizational

expectations for workers' aesthetic labor are not simply rooted in employers' anticipation of *customers'* aesthetic preferences, but also in employers' own biases relating to appearance and mannerisms.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, theoretical conceptions of aesthetic labor build on Hochschild's groundbreaking work, *The Managed Heart* (1983), which introduced the concept of "emotional labor," referring to the effort workers must put forth to exhibit the "right" feelings – and inducing the "right" feelings in others – while on the job. Importantly, a key difference between aesthetic and emotional labor is that aesthetic labor foregrounds embodiment, revealing how the corporeality, and not just the feelings, of employees are organizationally appropriated and transmuted for corporate benefit. This is not to suggest that Hochschild's theory ignored the issue of embodiment. Indeed, her core definition of emotional labor as "the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial or bodily display (1983 p.7) underscores this point.

Bodily Capital, Objectified Cultural Capital, and Habitus/Embodied Cultural Capital

Although the concept of aesthetic labor builds directly upon Hochschild's theory of emotional labor, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and habitus provide a more useful framework for understanding how workers acquire and refine their embodied attributes and capacities, and how this relates to social inequality. Through this framework, aesthetic labor is made up of a combination of *bodily capital*, *objectified cultural capital*, and *habitus/embodied cultural capital*.

Wacquant's (1995, 2004) concept of bodily capital recognizes the body itself as a form of capital. Bodily capital resides in and is bounded by one's corporeal body, through which

individuals cultivate “abilities and tendencies liable to produce value” (Wacquant 2004, p. 67) in a given social world. Ashley Mears (Mears 2011), further used the concept of bodily capital in her research on fashion models to point out that, although a person can enhance his or her bodily capital, many elements that make up bodily capital, such as height, build, and/or skin color, are fixed or at least very difficult to change. Bodily capital is linked to aesthetic labor in that the “fixed” aspects of a worker’s corporeal body constrain the possibilities of his or her personal presentation, and when workers’ manage and monitor their bodies in order to meet workplace expectations.

Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualization of cultural capital illustrates how non-economic assets contribute to social status. Bourdieu identifies three different types of cultural capital, including embodied (internalized and intangible), objectified (cultural products), and institutionalized (officially accredited). Of these, *objectified cultural capital* is particularly pertinent when considering aesthetic labor in that it exists in the form of cultural goods, such as books, instruments, or art. This form of capital relates to aesthetic labor through workers’ access to, possession of, and display of particular articles of clothing and/or other bodily accouterments, such as eyeglasses, jewelry, makeup, nail polish, etc.

The final piece of this framework links Bourdieu’s theories of *habitus*, referring to dispositions cultivated in childhood and relatively unchangeable in adulthood, and *embodied cultural capital*, referring to “competencies”, or skills that cannot be separated from – or that are embodied by – their bearer. I discuss these concepts together because they are neither the same thing, nor completely distinct:

...the accumulation of embodied cultural capital and the formation of habitus are in actuality two sides of the same socialization process; the situated internalization of cultural schemas. Habitus and embodied cultural capital are not separate things but rather “continuous with each other as “moments” of the same process.” (Moore

2008: 105)

This framework helps account for the fact that aesthetic laborers enter the workforce possessing certain embodied dispositions (*habitus*), *and* employers are able to further refine workers' capacities and dispositions through training (embodied cultural capital). Here, embodied cultural capital echoes Swidler's (1986) "tool kit" of habits and skills from which people construct "strategies of action" (p. 273). Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "habitus" when referring to internalized dispositions set in childhood through parenting and schooling, and the term "embodied cultural capital" when referring to dispositions that function as capital.

Intersectionality: Gender, Race, Class, and Body Size

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term and concept of *intersectionality* to articulate that the experiences of black women must be understood as more complex than the additive sum of their race and sex (Crenshaw 1989, Crenshaw 1991). Intersectional approaches to sociological research recognize that conceptions of inequality along the singular lines of racism, sexism, ageism, class, etc. do not act independently of one another, and instead interrelate to create a system of oppression that operates at the intersections of multiple axes of discrimination (Collins 1999). Throughout this dissertation I consider how body size intersects with gender, race, and class. I argue that, given intense moralizing around body size, a consideration of gender, race, and class oppressions *without* addressing body size as a further site of oppression renders an incomplete picture of social phenomena.

Contemporary mainstream America treats thinness as an esteemed individual accomplishment, while fatness is perceived as signaling a lack of moral fiber (Bordo 1993,

Bordo 2004, Popenoe 2005, Stearns 1997). Fat¹ individuals may be considered personally responsible for their weight; lazy; lacking in self-control and discipline; and incompetent (Kristen 2002, Larkin and Pines 1979, Puhl and Brownell 2003: 105); and are thus subjected to frequent discrimination and stigma. Size stigma is highly gendered in that contemporary American women experience intense pressures to conform to an increasingly thin ideal (Etcoff 2000: 196, Mazur 1986) while men are not held to the same stringent standards in terms of weight (Bordo 1993, Stearns 1997: 72). Although this “idealization of thinness” impacts both men and women (Stearns 1997: 17), “it is well documented and widely accepted that the scrutiny placed on female overweight is greater than the scrutiny placed on male overweight” (Bell and McNaughton 2007: 109).

In addition to gender, body size intersects with race/ethnicity and class status, typically in ways that compound disadvantage. For example, research shows a strong correlation between poverty and high body weight (Banks et al. 2006). This relationship is much stronger for adult women than for men. Although many people assume that being poor leads to higher body weight, there is stronger evidence that, in fact, fatness is impoverishing (Mason 2012, Sørensen 1995). As explained by Ernsberger (2009), “The driving force behind the concentration of fatness among the poor is social stigma and systematic discrimination, which deprives fat people of the opportunity to move up the social ladder.”

Race/ethnicity further intersects with body size such that, on average, poorer people of color – especially women – tend to be fatter than wealthier white people (Sobal and Stunkard 1989). High adiposity is also more common among minority groups, including Native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews, further magnifying discrimination (Ernsberger 2009).

¹ Although the word “fat” almost always takes pejorative connotations in popular discourse, I use this term in the spirit of the fat acceptance movement, which reclaims the word “fat” as a neutral descriptor, much as the gay rights movement reclaimed the word “queer.”

Thus, trends in actual body size are differently associated with gender, race/ethnicity, class, and age, such that poor ethnic minority women tend to be the heaviest for their height, while wealthy white women tend to be the leanest.

Cultural understandings of body size may intersect with and reify symbolic boundaries and inequality across these other categories. For example, some scholars argue that stereotypes of fat people lacking self-control may reinforce similar stereotypes of African-American women as having untapped appetites of a variety of natures, including those related to sex, reproduction, alcohol and drugs (Campos 2004, Flegal et al. 1998, Flegal et al. 2002, Hall 1983, Witt 1999, Witt 2002). In addition, African American and Latina women tend to feel more positively about their bodies at higher weights compared to white women (Grabe and Hyde 2006, Hesse-Biber et al. 2004, Molloy and Herzberger 1998); if women of color express pride in their bodies at larger weights by, for example, wearing revealing clothing, this may be interpreted by whites as a sign of poor taste or moral failing.

Unsurprisingly, larger women face workplace discrimination. Register and Williams (1990) found that young women (but not men) who were 20 percent or more over their standard weight for height earned 12 percent less than women with smaller body size. Similarly, Pagan and Davila (1997) found that clinically “overweight” women, earned less than “normal-weight” women, but that “overweight” men did not earn less than “normal-weight” men. Size discrimination may be particularly salient in low-wage occupations involving interactive service work. Jasper and Klassen (1990) found that a sample of college students rated fatter salespeople more negatively than thinner salespeople, and that the negative effects of larger body size were stronger for female salespeople than for male salespeople. In addition, fat persons working in face-to-face sales environments are often assigned to non-visible jobs (Bellizzi and Hasty 1998).

These findings suggest that workers' body size is an important trait to consider when examining aesthetic labor.

To date, body size has not played a prominent role in analyses of aesthetic labor. While the earliest studies of aesthetic labor paid some attention to the gendering of interactive service work, the primary analytical focus of early work in terms of social inequality was class status. In Hochschild's (1983) classic study of emotional labor, flight attendants' bodies were regulated through grooming guidelines, mandatory girdles, and pre-flight public weigh-ins: "People may in fact be fired for being one pound overweight" (p. 102). Similarly, Pettinger (Pettinger 2004) described saleswomen in upscale retail stores as follows: "Workers at such stores are not only fashionably dressed, they are young, *usually slim*, with 'attractive' faces" (Pettinger 2004).

While much research finds that women workers are expected to maintain slim figures, little work has explicitly examined the experiences of fat workers (indeed, in most of these workplaces, fat women would not have been hired, and slim women could be fired for gaining even a small amount of weight). Even Czerniawski's (2012) analysis of the aesthetic labor performed by plus-size fashion models admits that, because models are considered plus-size once they reach a size 8, "most casual observers of plus-size models would not perceive them as 'plus-size' or even fat" (p. 2). Considering that obese women are less likely to go to college than their thinner counterparts (Crosnoe and Muller 2004) and that minimum-wage earners are more likely to be obese than those who earn higher wages (DaeHwan and Leigh 2010), this lack of research documenting the experiences of female aesthetic laborers who are *actually* fat begs remedy.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation uses a multi-method approach to identify interactional mechanisms by which “aesthetic labor” reproduces and legitimizes labor market inequality, drawing on three case studies. While these projects are distinct, in conjunction they contribute empirical and theoretical understandings of the body and embodiment as a critical axis of social difference

Chapter 2, the first empirical chapter, draws on 13 months of participant observation of a non-profit organization that provides professional clothing and “style advice” to disadvantaged women entering the workforce. Although much research on gender inequality in the workplace rightfully interrogates the “glass ceiling,” it is also vital to understand social barriers to the “front door.” This study fills this gap in the literature by examining interactions between volunteer “personal stylists” and unemployed women in need of professional attire.

I found these interactions to be structured by organizational understandings of deserving versus undeserving poor: Certain types of clients were rumored to be more or less “picky” and more or less “deserving” of attentive service. For example, women referred from local domestic abuse shelters were reputed to be “picky” because many came from middle-class backgrounds and were not accustomed to wearing used clothing, yet “deserving,” because they were viewed as innocent victims. In contrast, clients referred by welfare-to-work programs were seen as “difficult” because they often asked for extra clothes, but were “undeserving” due to their status as welfare recipients. Young clients referred through junior colleges were seen as upwardly mobile, and thus “easy to work with” and “deserving.” Finally, across all of these groups, plus-sized women were regarded as more difficult clients, largely due to the relative lack of donated clothing in larger sizes in comparison to the number of plus-sized clients. These varying levels of “deservingness” predicted whether clients left with complete or incomplete interview outfits, and

because “undeserving” clients experienced symbolic violence, I argue that, despite providing a valuable service for disadvantaged women, the program also reproduced and obscured social inequality across race, class, age, and body size.

Chapter 3 draws on the case of female “fit models,” i.e., fashion workers with supposedly “perfect measurements” who try on prototype garments during the clothing production process. To analytically tease apart the bodily capital and cultural capital that makes up aesthetic labor, I compared content analyses of 77 job advertisements for fit models with data I collected through 17 interviews with fit models and those who work with them. I found that, although a fit model’s “perfect” bodily measurements were necessary at the point of hire, her job security ultimately depended on her ability to interact “professionally” with colleagues. Thus, even in jobs with seemingly exacting aesthetic standards, interactional mannerisms – which are largely shaped by women’s class and cultural backgrounds – can protect workers when their bodily capital diminishes.

An unexpected finding emerged in this study: Despite having bodies that are stigmatized and undervalued in most contexts, the “plus-sized” fit models I interviewed enjoyed more job security than “standard-sized” fit models, often keeping their jobs even after losing or gaining significant amounts of weight. I argue that this happens for two reasons. First, even though many American women are plus-sized, very few plus-sized women have the “hourglass” body shape desired by fashion firms, causing the pool of potential plus-sized fit models to be smaller than that of standard-sized fit models (who are more likely to have hourglass proportions). Second, I found that fashion designers often felt uncomfortable working with fat women, a bias that ultimately protected the plus-size models with whom they had developed pleasant relationships.

Chapter 4 is a workplace ethnography examining service interactions in a women’s “plus-

size” clothing store. I draw on 11 months of fieldwork to offer a more nuanced understanding of the ties between aesthetic labor and emotional labor, while highlighting some of the factors that prevent stigmatized groups from successfully reclaiming status within consumer contexts. Previous research on aesthetic labor has focused on workplaces aligned with mainstream beauty standards, but at this site, body-positive corporate branding challenged mainstream fat stigma. When employees used body-positive language during service interactions, they were often challenged by customers who ‘weren’t buying it, providing an opportunity to observe status negotiations. I found that both managers and white (but not Black or Latina) customers used body-disparaging “fat talk” to elicit workers’ emotional labor, while punishing thinner workers for defying the expectation that they should be plus-sized. While some psychologists describe “fat talk” as mundane and harmless, I argue that it is better understood as a discursive means by which women interactively reinforce status distinctions between one another.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, provides a summary of the key findings of the dissertation. I address how my findings expand upon sociological theories regarding the relationship between appearance and social inequality. In this chapter I also discuss how the theoretical implications of this study extend beyond the case of aesthetic labor, and conclude with recommendations for future research.

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Chapter 1

Unemployed Poor Women, Charitable “Makeovers” and Social Inequality

Much research on gender inequality in the workplace has rightfully interrogated the “glass ceiling.” Yet it is also vital that gender scholars understand social barriers to what might be termed the “front door,” by examining the experiences of disadvantaged women seeking entry into the low-wage labor market. The sociological literature on aesthetic labor suggests that poor women’s appearance and mannerisms may be an important barrier to their entry into the workforce, yet little research has explored processes by which adult women jobseekers might acquire these embodied capacities. To bridge this gap in the literature, I draw on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a Successful Women’s Outfitters¹ (SWO) affiliate office in the western United States. SWO is a nonprofit organization that aims to help disadvantaged women become economically self-sufficient by providing them with “style advice” and second-hand business attire to wear during job interviews.

This chapter builds on feminist critiques of U.S. welfare reform, bringing the literature on gendered volunteerism into conversation with literature exploring interactive service work as a form of “inequality in action” (Hanser 2012). I analyze SWO’s policies and procedures, alongside everyday interactions between SWO staff, volunteers, and clients to explore how power hierarchies between women are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced within this site. I argue that, despite providing an essential service to women who desperately need professional attire in order to interview for jobs, service encounters between SWO staff, volunteers, and

¹ The name of the nonprofit organization has been replaced with pseudonym to protect anonymity of the research subjects.

clients also reproduce both symbolic and material inequities, helping some clients more than others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) of 1996, which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program ended sixty-one years of poor families' entitlement to public assistance (Hays 2003). The PRWOA's welfare-to-work model "encouraged 'personal responsibility' through incentives and mandates designed to promote welfare exit, employment, and avoidance of nonmarital fertility" (Levine 2013). Feminist critiques of the PRWOA argue that it has done more harm than good. For example, sociologist Sandra Danziger reports that ten years after the 1996 welfare reform, "earnings of single mothers increased, [but] poverty changed relatively little and the number of families with neither wage income nor cash welfare increased" (Danziger 2011). The Great Recession of the later 2000s further exacerbated these struggles, as rates of welfare receipt remained steady despite increases in poverty, resulting in growth in "the number of vulnerable families with access to neither work nor cash assistance" (Danziger 2011).

Many critiques of the PRWOA center on the mandates of "workfare," which require welfare recipients to aggressively apply for work and to accept the first job they are offered, "no matter how dangerous, abusive, or poorly paid" (Ehrenreich 2003). From this perspective, a core problem centers on workfare's inflexibility, which requires poor women to enter a labor market in which there are not enough good jobs to go around. Moreover, many poor, single mothers who have been able to secure employment have simply joined the working poor, as they are unable to

make a decent living despite employment (Handler and Hasenfeld 2007). Neubeck (2013) further describes PRWOA as a “one-size-fits-all” program that “ignores the extremely diverse characteristics and experiences of this nation’s impoverished lone-mother-headed families.”

The reduction of state resources available to vulnerable women and their families, along with stringent welfare time limits, lead to the increased role of non-state organizations providing social services. As Collins and Mayer (2010) explain, “as state services are increasingly curtailed or outsourced to non- and quasi-state organizations, low-income women, and especially single mothers, are increasingly compelled to turn to such private benevolence” (Collins and Mayer 2010, Mayer 2008). And yet, private benevolence is not without its issues. As argued by Ostrander (1980) in her study of elite women and the “masked class dimensions” of volunteer work, “private upper class volunteerism [...] functions to maintain elite control over matters of public concern.” Through volunteerism, existing power relations between volunteers and recipients along the lines of gender, race, and class may become more salient, as volunteers strive to improve the lot of their charges while also protecting their own superior status (Ware 1992).

Of specific interest to this study is the extent to which philanthropic aid to poor women – a historically feminized domain – positions white middle- and upper-class women as role models and “saviors” of poor women of color, reinforcing hegemonic notions of gender, class, and race, and protecting rather than challenging existing power relations. Historically, racialized conceptions of women’s morality, temperament, appearance, and sexuality have depicted black women as both opposite and inferior to white women (Collins 2000, Collins 2004, Craig 2002, Hobson 2005, hooks 1993, Morton 1991, Rooks 1996, Shaw 2005). Several scholars examining middle-and upper-class women’s volunteerism and philanthropy find that the volunteer-client

relationship offers genuine help to low-income women while also reinscribing boundaries of class and race privilege between them (Eschle 2001, Hays 2003, Koven and Michel 1993, Peterson 2003).

These concerns are particularly relevant to philanthropic efforts closely tied to welfare reform, as feminist scholars argue that the PRWOA was built upon and perpetuates the “welfare queen” stereotype, which reinforces distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor people (Handler and Hasenfeld 2007, Neubeck 2013). Barbara Ehrenreich (2003) describes PRWOA as “motivated by racism/misogyny, using stereotypes of lazy, overweight, slovenly, sexually indulgent and ‘endlessly fecund’ African-American welfare recipients, particularly unwed mothers” (see also Brush 2003, Hays 2003). These stereotypes craft “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont and Molnar 2002) that prevent welfare recipients from being perceived as respectable, decent women.

In the context of social welfare organizations, notions of clients’ deservingness, such as those described above, often lead to material inequalities. Lipsky’s (1971, 1980, 2010) theory of “street level bureaucracy²” suggests that welfare workers facing limited time and resources selectively ration and restrict services such that clients seen as “undeserving” are most likely to receive substandard service (see also Horváth and Janky 2012, Lang 1981, Miller 1985, Peyrot 1982, Reid 2013, Ross and Glisson 1991, Roth 1972, Stanton 1970). As “street level bureaucrats,” SWO staff and volunteers may provide less help and fewer resources to clients who appear to conform to negative stereotypes.

² Lipsky’s (1977) concept of street-level bureaucracy refers to the subset of public agencies or government institutions containing the individuals who actually carry out and enforce the actions mandated by laws and public policy. Lipsky illustrates that these individuals vary in the extents to which they enforce laws and rules, and in doing so should be understood as part of the “policy-making community,” rather than simply enforcers of policy.

Training Aesthetic Laborers

Workfare has brought about a specific demand for state and non-state programs focused on job training and job readiness. While some programs focus specifically on training welfare recipients in “hard skills,” such as typing, math, reading, and/or familiarity with software programs, other programs focus on clients’ need for “soft skills,” which include one’s interactional mannerisms and self-presentation. Successful Women’s Outfitters is one such philanthropic organization, having emerged with the specific intention of addressing inequality by assisting female job seekers through “style interventions”.

A growing body of sociological literature on labor market inequality specifically examines how “soft skills” shape workers’ career trajectories. This research has introduced the concept of “aesthetic labor” (Nickson et al. 2003, Warhurst et al. 2000, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003, Wolkowitz 2006), noting that workplaces draw on unique gendered, raced, and classed expectations to determine which workers will be hired to do what jobs, and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job. First conceived by Warhurst et al. (2000), aesthetic labor includes “a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness” (Williams and Connell 2010), a list illustrating that aesthetic labor is accomplished through a combination of mannerisms and physical appearance. Stated another way, workplace expectations for aesthetic labor require the right combination of *habitus*, *bodily capital*, and *objectified cultural capital*.

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions through which people navigate the social world. *Objectified cultural capital* – also introduced by Bourdieu – exists in the form of cultural goods, such as books, instruments, or art. This form of capital relates to aesthetic labor through workers’ possession and display of particular styles of

clothing and/or other bodily accouterments, such as eyeglasses, jewelry, makeup, nail polish, etc. Drawing on Bourdieu, Wacquant (1995, 2004) introduced the concept of *bodily capital* to illustrate the body itself as a form of capital. Bodily capital resides in and is bounded by one's corporeal body, through which individuals cultivate "abilities and tendencies liable to produce value" (Wacquant 1995, p. 67) in a given social world. Ashley Mears (Mears 2011), further used the concept of bodily capital in her research on fashion models to point out that, although a person can enhance his or her bodily capital, many elements that make up bodily capital, such as height, build, and/or skin color, are fixed, or at least very difficult to change.

Although U.S. law protects workers from discrimination on the bases of gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion, workplace expectations for a certain aesthetic types or styles of workers often map onto these categories in ways that are discriminatory but not protected. As explained by Williams and Connell (2010) in their study of upscale retailers, "In virtually every case, the right aesthetic [for workers to embody] is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white" (p. 350). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker's gender, ethnicity, age, body type, and/or class-imbued habitus limit her ability to meet a particular organization's implicit or explicit aesthetic standards (Witz, Warhurst et al. 2003; Williams and Connell 2010).

Workers may also face weight-based discrimination, which is not protected by federal law³ (Rhode 2010). For example, a 2010 study titled "Too Big to Hire: Factors Impacting Weight Discrimination" found that employers' perceptions of applicant weight caused the employers to bias their decisions about individuals who are overweight during the hiring process, "particularly for jobs that are high in visibility and physical demands" (Bartels and Nordstrom 2013). Weight discrimination is highly gendered, with women facing harsher social penalties for failing to meet

³ A few state and city laws do include protection from discrimination on the basis of body size.

the thin ideal, compared to men (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). Body size often maps onto race, class, and age in ways that compound oppressions: Whites tend to be less fat than Blacks and/or Latinos, wealthy people tend to be thinner than poor people, and young people tend to be thinner than old people. Given that weight and income are negatively correlated in the United States, many imagine that poverty must cause fatness. However, evidence instead suggests that, due to workplace discrimination, fatness actually *causes* downward mobility (Ernsberger 2009).

Gaps remain in the literature on aesthetic labor, particularly as it relates to social mobility. For one, the extant literature on aesthetic labor largely presumes that aesthetic and embodied capacities are cultivated in childhood through the institutions of early socialization such as the family (Lareau 2003) and schools (Khan 2010), and that they are relatively unchangeable in adulthood. The limited scholarly work that *does* consider adult workers' efforts to maintain or change their embodied capacities has focused on already-employed workers who have middle-class habitus, such as fashion models (i.e., Mears 2011). In contrast, the Successful Women's Outfitters mission presumes that poor women can acquire, or at least perform, middle-class tastes and dispositions if given access to professional clothing (objectified cultural capital) and "style advice." As such, this approach positions middle- and upper-class women, who donate clothing and act as stylists, as saviors and role models for poor women. How does this approach challenge or reinforce gendered hierarchies between women?

Street-Level Bureaucrats as "Taste Brokers"

Several scholars (e.g., Fountain 2001, Korczynski 2009) find the sociological literature on interactive service work to be a useful framework for understanding power relations between "street-level bureaucrats" and their clients. In a review of current research linking service

encounters to class hierarchies, Hanser (2012) depicts these interactions as “inequality-in-action,” noting that gendered, racialized, and class-based power relations between workers and clients are legitimized during service encounters through displays of entitlement and deference (see also Hanser 2008, Kang 2010, Lan 2003, Sherman 2005, Williams and Connell 2010, among others).

Of particular relevance to this paper is research examining how service workers serve as “taste brokers” by “making consumption-related aesthetic choices with and for clients” (Sherman (Sherman 2011 p. 201). Sherman’s study analyzes the “taste work” of personal concierges, whose job tasks included organizing clients’ closets, identifying chic new restaurants worth trying, and even choosing gifts for clients’ romantic partners. Although all clients were wealthy, some – particularly the newly rich or upwardly mobile – were viewed by concierges as having inferior, “cheap” taste. In these cases, concierges faced a tension between their own desires to maintain “good” taste and their need to display deference to their clients’ preferences. Sherman argues that taste brokers’ work reproduces social difference by helping to solidify clients’ class positions, and by legitimizing distinctions between “good” and “bad” taste.

In contrast to Sherman’s study, other research on taste brokers illustrates that clients are not always in positions of power; feminist analyses of the “makeover” genre of reality TV shows provide a particularly relevant perspective. For example, Angela McRobbie’s (2004) analysis of British “makeover” television shows describes female makeover recipients as the “victim/participants” of symbolic violence enacted by “style experts.” Illustrating how these shows are rooted in the public humiliation of disadvantaged women “for their failure to adhere to middle-class standards of speech or appearance,” McRobbie argues that style experts’ interactions with their “willing victims” generates and legitimates forms of “gendered class

antagonism.” Weber’s (2007) analysis of what she calls “makeover as takeover” TV shows similarly highlight sentiments of deference and authority, finding that it is not until the makeover client “surrenders and thereby acknowledges the rightness of the makeover as takeover, [that] she makes the transition from being the target of shaming into instead being the recipient of affection and approval” (for similar analyses of makeover TV shows, see also Franco 2008, Frith, Raisborough and Klein 2010, Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert 2007, Heller 2007, Lancioni 2010, Lewis 2013, Pentney 2012, Redden and Brown 2010).

Like Sherman’s personal concierges and McRobbie’s “style experts,” Successful Women’s Outfitters staff, donors, and volunteers can be understood as taste brokers in relation to their clients. However, the extent to which service interactions at SWO will reproduce or challenge gendered power relations is difficult to predict. On one hand, by enacting the roles of “worker” and “customer,” it is possible that SWO staff and volunteers – like the concierges in Sherman’s work – will defer to their clients’ preferences, particularly in light of SWO’s stated mission to “empower” clients. On the other hand, as “street-level bureaucrats,” staff and volunteers may instead engage in “gendered class antagonism” to influence lower-class clients to defer to their “superior tastes.”

Background: Successful Women’s Outfitters History and Organizational Structure

One year after the passage of PRWOA, a woman-run non-profit organization called Successful Women’s Outfitters (SWO) opened its first location in a large Northeastern city with the goal of helping disadvantaged women become economically self-sufficient by providing them with “style advice” and second-hand professional attire for job interviews. The organization operates under the assumption that poor women are unfairly disadvantaged in the

labor market, particularly at the interview stage, because they lack professional business attire, a notion supported by sociological research on “aesthetic labor.” Stated differently, SWO believes that low-income women are unsuccessful would-be workers at least in part because they lack the appropriate objectified cultural capital, in the form of dress, to secure employment.

The stated mission of SWO is to “promote the economic independence of disadvantaged women by providing professional attire, a network of support and the career development tools to help women thrive in work and in life” (SWO website, April 2014). Notably, this mission goes beyond helping poor women get jobs, aiming instead for the more ambitious goal of helping them become economically independent. In other words, the aim is for clients to not only secure employment, but for them to earn enough income to be financially independent and no longer require state assistance.

Since its founding in the late 1990s, Successful Women’s Outfitters has rapidly expanded from a single New York City office to 129 affiliate locations worldwide (SWO website). SWO claims to serve nearly 70,000 women per year in the United States and abroad. The original SWO office, renamed Successful Women’s Outfitters-Worldwide, was reorganized to oversee and provide support to affiliate offices, to promote the Successful Women’s Outfitters brand internationally, and to develop relationships with corporate, media, and other sponsors. All SWO organizations are not-for-profit entities, with Successful Women’s Outfitters-Worldwide and its U.S. affiliates having 501(c)(3) charitable status and those outside the United States operating as registered charities. Across all 129 SWO affiliate offices, 79 percent of clients are mothers; 76 percent are single (never married) women; and 15 percent are divorced, separated, or widowed. Clients range in age from 18 to 60 years, with the majority aged 18 to 38 years. The SWO

website describes clients as representing “all ethnicities and races,” though specific statistics are unavailable.

As will be discussed in further detail below, SWO affiliate offices aim to evoke a high-end “makeover” shopping experience for their low-income clients by decorating offices to resemble high-end boutiques, and by providing volunteer “Personal Shoppers” to assist women with the selection of clothing and accessories. The core – and most well-known – service offered by SWO is its Suiting Program, which is offered at all 129 affiliate offices. SWO’s Suiting Program promises a solution to “the Catch-22 that confronts disadvantaged women returning to or entering the workforce: without a job, how can you afford a suit? But without a suit, how can you get a job?” (SWO website, April 2014) Clients must be referred to SWO by state social service agencies or nonprofit organizations, such as job training programs, homeless shelters, domestic violence agencies, and educational institutions. Officially, clients must live below the poverty line, be “work-ready,” and have a scheduled job interview before they can receive clothing. I observed some exceptions to this policy, which I describe in later sections.

A typical first suiting appointment consisted of the client receiving a brief orientation describing the services available through SWO, followed by a 30- to 45-minute “makeover” in which a volunteer Personal Shopper assisted the client in finding one interview outfit, ideally consisting of a full business suit, a matching blouse, shoes, and other accessories as needed. Once a client secured employment, she could return for a second suiting appointment, during which she would receive additional clothing intended to be mixed and matched to create several outfits. This second suiting appointment is intended to provide clients with the foundation of a professional wardrobe.

The specific Successful Women’s Outfitters affiliate office in which I conducted my

fieldwork was located in the urban downtown area of a major West Coast city in the United States. I refer to this office as Successful Women's Outfitters – West Coast (SWO-WC). The SWO-WC office was located on the second floor of a five-story office building that was mostly filled with small optometry and dental practices. The SWO-WC office contained three rooms, combined to mimic a fashion boutique. I refer to the three rooms as the “front room,” the “boutique,” and the “back room.”

The front room combined an office area and waiting area, where clients would check in for their appointments. The second room, called “the boutique,” was adjacent to the front room, separated by an open doorway. Above the doorway an inspirational quote from Oprah Winfrey reminded clients as they walked in that “Life is about becoming more than we are.”

The boutique was designed to mimic the aesthetic experience of being in a high-end shopping boutique. It was lined by built-in closet cabinetry, housing racks of hanging suits carefully organized by color and size. In addition, there was a display case featuring jewelry; decorative baskets stacked on the floor that held handbags, scarves, and belts; and several large matching travel chests contained high-heeled pumps and boots. Two curtained dressing rooms with full-length mirrors lined one wall, and two mannequins were positioned on opposite corners of the space, both wearing chic business suits along with matching purses and accessories. One mannequin was positioned with her right hand reaching out, as though for a firm handshake. Inspirational posters and images decorated the walls, such as a framed Theodore Roosevelt quote encouraging clients to “Believe you can and you're halfway there,” and a large poster featuring a stock photo of the torso of a woman wearing a black suit-jacket and extending her right hand as though initiating a handshake. Behind a door in the back of the boutique was the “back room,” which served as a stockroom for additional clothing, accessories, and office supplies.

The paid employees at SWO-WC included one full-time executive director, one full-time program coordinator, and two part-time program coordinators. The executive director, Rachel⁴, was a white woman in her late 30s, who came from a middle-class background and was a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. The program coordinator, Gina, was a white woman in her late 20s who came from a working-class background and had earned her undergraduate degree. One part-time program coordinator, Vanessa, was a Latina in her early 20s who was finishing her Bachelor's degree at a local state college. I was the second part-time program coordinator, a middle-class white woman in her early 30s, earning her PhD in Sociology.

Volunteers at SWO-WC included college interns who were earning course credit and typically performed office work, volunteer Personal Shoppers who attended to clients during their suiting appointments, and who came into the office anywhere from once per year to multiple times per week, depending on availability and need. The office records indicated that there were 550 total volunteers on the email list, and that 359 volunteers were "active," indicating that they had volunteered at least one time in the preceding calendar year.

Just over 1,000 clients were referred to my field site in 2013, resulting in 621 "first suiting" appointments and 98 "second suiting" appointments. Forty-five percent of clients identified as African American, 17 percent identified as Latina, 17 percent identified as White/Caucasian, 13 percent identified as Asian, 4 percent identified as Pacific Islander, and 4 percent were other or unknown. In terms of age, 4 percent of clients were younger than 18 years old, 28 percent were between 18 and 24 years of age, 17 percent were 25 to 30 years of age, 22 percent were 31 to 40 years of age, 18 percent were 41 to 50 years of age, and 11 percent were older than 50. SWO-WC records indicate that 107 referral agencies had been approved to refer clients, and that 68

⁴ This is a pseudonym, as are all names used here. I have also changed minor details of some of the interactions I describe in order to preserve confidentiality.

different referral agencies had referred at least one client in 2013.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I draw on ethnographic data collected during thirteen months of participant observation at a West Coast affiliate office of Successful Women's Outfitters, which I call SWO-WC. During my time at SWO-WC I observed interactions between staff, volunteers, and low-income clients during 132 (pre-interview) first suiting appointments and 9 (post job-offer) second suiting appointments. In addition to time spent solely observing suiting appointments, I also served for seven months as a volunteer intern and was eventually hired on a contractual basis to work 10 hours per month for six months as a paid part-time program coordinator. I also reviewed the SWO-Worldwide website along with informational pamphlets and flyers to help capture dimensions of what Pudrovska and Ferree (2004) refer to as the organization's "self-identity."

When serving as a volunteer intern, I participated in a variety of tasks and events both onsite at the SWO office and at several offsite locations. Onsite tasks included: sorting donated clothing, filing paperwork, booking suiting appointments with clients, conducting follow-up calls to clients to confirm appointments, giving clients their orientations, liaising with the social service organizations that referred clients, and giving presentations at a local community college and at a job search center. I also volunteered during four of the organization's annual fundraising events, including two Power Walks and two Fashion Celebration Galas.

I was open with SWO staff and volunteers about my intention to write a research paper based on the goings-on at the SWO office. While working as an intern, sitting behind a desk in the office, I took brief field notes into a small notebook and was occasionally able to record my observations in greater detail by using one of the office computers. During my observations of

suiting appointments, I was allowed to use my laptop, and thus was able to type fairly extensive field notes on the spot. I occasionally recorded additional observations in handwritten notes. In both cases, I elaborated on my initial notes after leaving the site. I analyzed these data inductively by reading through my field notes several times and constructing “theme sheets” as different themes emerged.

When coding service interactions between SWO Personal Shoppers and clients, I developed codes to assess clients’ access to symbolic and material resources. I assessed symbolic inequities on three measures: (1) the amount of time a Personal Shopper spent with her client *after* finding an interview outfit that fit the client, but which the client didn’t like. In other words, once a “good enough” interview outfit had been found, how much *additional* time and effort did a Personal Shopper spend trying to find an outfit that the client likes more? (2) the types of rhetorical statements used if the client was convinced/forced to accept an outfit she did not like, and (3) whether clients’ appointments were overbooked.

To assess material differences resulting from Personal Shoppers’ interactions with clients, I made note of (1) whether the client left with a full suit (a suit jacket, blouse, and either pants or skirt), (2) whether she was also provided with accessories such as shoes, a handbag, jewelry, etc., and (3) whether or not she received any “extras,” which I define as any duplicate items, such as an extra blouse or pair of shoes. I also limited my analyses to observations of first suiting appointments, because second suiting appointments were made up of a much narrower group of clients – those who had already achieved employment – and because second suiting appointments were specifically intended to include extras to help the client build a more extensive professional wardrobe.

One weakness of this study is the extent to which the specific events and patterns I

observed at SWO-WC are representative of other offices within SWO-Worldwide, or across other organizations. In addition, because Gina was the only staff member working full-time on site in the SWO-WC office, she served as my primary informant for explaining the goings-on at the site from the staff perspective. Thus, my findings are necessarily biased toward Gina's specific understanding of the site. That said, because Gina's role was to manage all day-to-day operations of SWO-WC, including the training and management of volunteers, her understanding of the site and her implementation of its policies – as a street-level bureaucrat – formed the site's reality. I frequently heard Personal Shoppers repeat Gina's advice word for word, and saw that Gina had the "final say" at times when a Personal Shopper could not convince a client to select an outfit.

FINDINGS

Successful Women's Outfitters staff and Personal Shoppers' roles as taste brokers, combined with clients' relative powerlessness, implicitly juxtaposed "good," successful, cultured, independent women against an image of "bad," deviant, immoral women who depend on handouts. This had the effect of legitimizing dominant white, middle-class norms of femininity. In addition to restricting clients' access to "inappropriate" clothing, SWO staff and volunteers engaged in gatekeeping behaviors by also limiting clients' access to luxurious goods, which were deemed "too good" for, or "a waste on," lower-class women. This "taste work" actively cultivated a certain type of classed future worker – one who appeared respectable, yet knew her place. Finally, service encounters between Personal Shoppers and clients revealed that only the most "deserving" clients – those who were perceived to have the "right attitude" and

whose bodies conformed to middle-class standards for appearance – received better treatment and more and better material resources than those deemed “undeserving.”

Sorting Donations

SWO-WC’s donation-sorting process involved careful consideration of which styles and qualities of clothes would be available to clients. By rejecting both garments that weren’t “good enough” *and* valuable garments that were “too good,” SWO staff and volunteers controlled both the upper and lower boundaries of respectable taste.

All garments offered to clients by SWO-WC were donated, and the items that would be accepted for donation were quite specific. As explained on the website, SWO-WC would “ONLY accept the following”: interview-appropriate suits (matching jacket/pant or skirt), interview-appropriate blouses; professional separates including blouses, slacks, skirts, dresses, blazers and jackets, work-appropriate shoes; jewelry and scarves; and handbags (briefcases, portfolios, or work-appropriate handbags). Donors were instructed that all clothing should be recently washed and on hangers or neatly folded in bags. Additionally, the website noted that garments and shoes in larger sizes were especially needed. Once a donor dropped off items to donate, the items would be brought into the back room to be stored until a volunteer was available to unpack, sort, and put away all of the garments.

Donations were sorted as follows: First, any “inappropriate” garments were immediately thrown away or donated to a local homeless shelter. Clothing found to be dirty, stained, overly casual, or items judged by volunteers to be “tacky”, “cheap”, “too loud”, “unfashionable”, or “trashy” were considered “inappropriate.” “Cheap” and “tacky” seemed to be code for “working class”; “unfashionable” seemed to be code for either outdated or overly masculine; and “trashy”

or “too loud” seemed to be code for sexually provocative. I noticed that “unfashionable” stained, worn, or outdated (but not trashy) garments sized 16 or larger were often kept, because “the big girls never have enough,” a finding I return to later.

Ironically, despite SWO-WC’s intention to mimic a high-end boutique in decor, high-end *garments* never made it out of the back room. Of the remaining “good enough” garments, the next step was to remove those that were “too good.” All valuable garments (i.e., couture or otherwise well-known expensive brands) were set aside so that they could be sold through a local consignment shop. When I asked Gina why these items weren’t offered to the clients, during my first week of observation, she sighed and said, “Yeah, we have to make tough decisions about how a donation will help the most. If selling stuff helps us keep our doors open, it’s better than helping just the one client who might wear it. It’s not like these ladies are interviewing anywhere where a vintage Chanel jacket is going to open doors. Besides, if they knew it was worth something, they’d just sell it themselves and who knows what they’d do with the money!”

When I asked Gina to explain this a bit more, she described it as being for the clients’ own good: “Well, I’m not saying they’re are all on drugs or something, but they need to get a job, not more stuff, you know?” There was, of course, truth to Gina’s assessment that SWO clients were unlikely to interview for jobs in which luxurious couture garments would “open doors.” And yet, Gina’s description of clients who would rather sell an expensive jacket for drugs and “more stuff” instead of pursuing employment evoked “welfare queen” stereotypes of women.

Several weeks later, I was sorting clothes with Joyce, a white woman in her forties who was a longtime volunteer. One of the purses donated appeared to be made by the designer brand Louis Vuitton. It had clearly been used, but was in fairly good shape. Joyce, whose own handbag

was also made by Louis Vuitton, brought her purse in so we could try to figure out whether or not it was genuine or a knock-off.

After a few minutes of looking at seams and labels, Joyce said, “You know, this might be a real Louis. We should send it to the [consignment] shop and see what they think.” I suggested that, “But it’s pretty worn. Maybe one of the clients would really cherish it.” In response, Joyce replied, “Oh I have no doubt! Everybody wants a Louis! But, think about it. What would YOU think if you were interviewing someone for a job and she showed up with a \$3,000 bag like this but only half her teeth? That’s not what a responsible person looks like, you know?”

By describing the Louis Vuitton bag as being inappropriate “conspicuous consumption” for a poor woman who wouldn’t know how to wear it, Joyce framed herself as saving clients from their own poor taste. Joyce’s belief that an employer may find an expensive bag to be distasteful is a legitimate concern. And yet, just as this logic claims to benefit SWO clients, it also benefits Joyce and other upper-class women. By controlling poor women’s access to luxury goods, SWO staff and volunteers also limit poor women’s ability to “pass” as upper-class. I argue that this is a form of gatekeeping that erects a ceiling on poor women’s upward mobility.

The remaining “work-appropriate” garments would be sorted first by whether they were full (matching) suits or if they were solo items (i.e., blouses, skirts, and pants that did not arrive as a matching set), referred to as “separates.” All of the full suits would be brought to the boutique area and organized by size and color, and suit jackets would be hung with matching pants/skirts alongside suits of the same color family, organized by size. All of the separates were to stay in the back room, where they were organized first by type of item (blouses, jackets, pants, skirts, outerwear, dresses, etc.) and then sorted by size. Accessories like shoes, purses, scarves, belts, and jewelry were sorted by item type and then stored in the back room, with a few select items brought out to the boutique for the display.

By controlling which donated garments will be offered to clients, volunteers and staff

presume that clients' poor tastes render them unable to choose their own clothing. By only accepting garments that were "good enough but not too good," SWO staff and volunteers narrowed the universe of choice for their clients in order to produce a certain kind of aesthetic laborer: A woman who dresses respectably, but also does not dress above her station, a woman who is upwardly mobile but not overly ambitious. Controlling what garments are available legitimizes "superior" tastes of middle- and upper-class women, while also maintaining class boundaries.

Service Encounters

While SWO-WC's office décor replicated a "boutique shopping experience," a central tension pervaded the site: DSF staff and volunteers were expected to make the clients *feel* like they were customers shopping at a fancy boutique while not actually allowing them any of the privileges afforded to real customers. Instead of "the customer is always right," Gina joked, "The client is usually wrong!" Clients were carefully managed at every stage of their interactions with SWO-WC. Although SWO-WC aimed for clients to be happy with their interview outfit, efficiency in staying within the scheduled appointment time was prioritized over clients' satisfaction.

When working as an intern in charge of scheduling clients, I was warned to "Never ask a client when *she's* available. Instead offer her *our* first available appointment. If she says she can't make that one, offer her our next available appointment, and so on, in order, until she commits. If you start out giving her the choice she'll think she's in charge, and figure she can jerk us around." When I called clients in the morning to confirm the day's appointments, I read verbatim from a script stating, "As a reminder, you may not bring children or guests along with

you for your appointment,” because, as Gina explained, “They need to treat this like a real job interview. We aren’t childcare.” When a client arrived for her first suiting appointment, she received an “orientation” in which I was required to “manage expectations” by explaining that we would try our best but couldn’t guarantee that she would receive exactly what she wanted for her interview outfit in terms of style, color, or fit. Clients had to sign a waiver indicating that they understood this.

Once a client met her Personal Shopper, this cultivated management continued, following additional rules. Before I the first time I served as a Personal Shopper, I was told to look at the client’s referral form to see what size she wore, and to use this information to select two or three suits ahead of time for her to try on. Vanessa, one of the program coordinators, suggested,

Make sure you don’t let her go shopping, you know? No browsing. So you should never leave the client alone in the boutique area. If you aren’t ready for her to start trying things on, she needs to stay in the waiting area. If she starts wandering into the boutique, say, “Oh, don’t worry! I can do that for you!”

Perhaps the most troubling technique Personal Shoppers used to make sure clients didn’t wander around the boutique unsupervised was Joyce’s suggestion that I wait until my client had gone back into her changing room before looking for additional clothes: “She’s not going to wander around naked, right?”

One afternoon I overheard Gina chastise Emily, a 23-year-old Chinese-American woman finishing her degree in fashion merchandising, for being too “nice” with a client, whose appointment had run fifteen minutes late: “Make sure she shows you *every single thing* she tries on, even if she doesn’t like it or doesn’t think it fits. Sometimes they don’t think it fits, but it does – they just aren’t used to wearing professional clothes.” Personal Shoppers learned to draw on their own cultural capital in these cases, not only to help decide which clothing options were “most appropriate” for each client, but as a rhetorical device for convincing clients to accept

outfits they did not like. The boutique echoed with phrases such as, “Trust me, I’ve been where you are and this is just what you have to do!” or “Trust me, you look great!” or “Trust me, this is what will make a good impression for your interview!” or “Trust me, you’re just not used to dressing this way, but you look great!” Volunteers were similarly required to wear “work-appropriate business attire” when working with clients, so as to model proper fit and styling, and so we could point to our own clothing choices if clients challenged our advice. These rhetorical techniques closely resemble the language used by the “style experts” described in McRobbie’s scathing analysis of “makeover” TV shows, and by the same logic, I argue that SWO Personal Shoppers’ interactions constituted a form of symbolic violence.

Building on these techniques for managing clients’ expectations and behaviors, the sections below detail how Personal Shoppers’ beliefs about their clients’ “deservingness” further shaped service interactions such that certain clients were privileged over others. These observations revealed that clients who already possessed favored mannerisms and bodily capital were most likely to receive favorable treatment.

Habitus

The Successful Women’s Outfitters website proudly claims that, “Our concern is not where our clients have been, but where they are going.” And yet, “where clients have been” – or, more specifically, the social service organization from which they were referred – predicted clients’ uneven access to symbolic and material resources. Service interactions between Personal Shoppers and clients were shaped by notions of which clients were “deserving vs. undeserving” and “easy vs. difficult”; it was assumed that certain organizations referred “deserving poor” while others referred “undeserving poor.” As explained to me by Gina before my first time

serving as a Personal Shopper, “I can tell who will be picky based on the organization that sent them.” Clients perceived as difficult and/or undeserving were treated with less patience and were less likely to receive complete interview outfits.

Personal Shoppers typically learned about these stereotypes before their interactions with clients, as Gina generally “prepped” Personal Shoppers at the beginning of their shifts by listing the women who were scheduled for appointments that day. In addition, the referral forms, which were given to Personal Shoppers at the beginning of each appointment, listed the referring agency. Below I describe how stereotypes about referring organizations shaped clients experiences in terms of both symbolic and material outcomes; I argue that, although suiting appointments clearly provided much-needed clothing for interviews, interactions during appointments resulted in micro-inequities across different types of women. I highlight differences in treatment across three groups of clients: those referred to satisfy state-mandated workfare requirements, those referred through youth organizations and/or community colleges, and the remaining women who were referred from a variety of other non-state programs.

Forty-five percent of SWO’s suiting clients were referred through state programs, including welfare-to-work programs (36 percent of all clients) as well as those coming from state-mandated rehabilitation programs for drug and/or alcohol abuse (9 percent of all clients). These women were required by their caseworkers to attend SWO appointments as a condition for continuing to receive benefits. This group of women, which Gina referred to broadly as “the TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program] Ladies,” had a bad reputation. Clients referred through welfare-to-work and rehab programs were viewed as manipulative and difficult, and undeserving because they were “dependent on welfare and didn’t even want to get jobs.” One of the interns said, “Oh yeah, they’re the gimme, gimme, gimme types of people”

who will “work the system if we let them.” Gina warned the Personal Shoppers that, “They challenge us,” they’ll “always ask for extras,” and “barely two-thirds even bother to show up to their appointments.” When I asked Gina why SWO kept working with the welfare office if the clients were so frustrating, she explained that the welfare-to-work office was under contract to pay SWO around \$100 for each client’s visit.

Thus, despite Gina’s frustration with the TANF Ladies, she was financially motivated to maximize the number of state referrals. The solution, I learned, was that interns were instructed to schedule all of the TANF referrals on the same day, and were told to fill slots such that appointments were often double- or triple-booked. “They’re no-shows so often that I have to book four at a time if I want to have two!” Gina explained. Of course, this meant that if all of the appointments *did* show up, the boutique would have more clients than dressing rooms, and usually more clients than volunteers as well. Sometimes clients were asked to wait for up to an hour and a half, or asked to “come back in an hour.” Other times TANF clients were asked to share fitting rooms by taking turns dressing/undressing, while being assisted by one Personal Shopper between the two of them. This led to less attentive service, and less happy clients; it seemed that the priority when dealing with TANF referrals was efficiency rather than client satisfaction.

The first time I served as a Personal Shopper was on a TANF day. Accustomed to working in clothing stores as a salesperson, it felt most natural to treat clients the way I’d been taught to treat customers: in accordance with the logic that “the customer is always right.” My first client, Janae, was a 30-year-old African-American single mother of two “baby girls” who was going to a job fair the following day. I brought Janae several size 8 suits to try on. Because we were the same age, I tried to pick suits with a style I’d like to wear. Once we’d found a suit she liked, I

helped pick out shoes, a purse, and then jewelry. The appointment took longer than I'd expected, but Janae seemed pleased with her outfit, so I was also pleased. I was running late for my next appointment, and mentioned that to Beth, a white woman around my age, who was the other Personal Shopper on duty. "Uh oh!" said Beth, who continued:

Don't indulge them. You need to learn how to "close the deal" with these ladies. You can't spend so much time finding them the cutest suit out of seven. In fact, don't let them take more than two suits in at a time, and push for them to take the first suit that fits. Don't let them take more and don't get caught up in the accessories. They'll always ask for extra jewelry, and I'm pretty sure they sometimes take it without even asking, like everything is free, you know?

I nodded and thanked Beth for the advice. Later that day Gina asked me how my first day as Personal Shopper was going. I mentioned that I wasn't as fast as the other volunteers, but that I was having fun. Echoing the language Beth used, Gina suggested, "It's all about closing the deal. You have to use tough love when they push you to try on more stuff. If they're really picky about the clothes, say, 'So, what were you *planning* to wear to the interview?' You know, and they know, that they don't have any other options." TANF referrals almost always left with a full business suit (unless they were plus-sized, which I discuss further below), although they weren't always thrilled with their outfit. They also typically received shoes and jewelry. However, I noticed that TANF clients only received jewelry when they specifically asked, and that they never received "extras", even when they asked.

Interns and staff also displayed less patience and flexibility when working with TANF clients who arrived late to appointments or had to reschedule. "I'm so annoyed by this ghetto stuff!" one intern exclaimed after failing to reach a client (who wanted to reschedule her appointment) by phone. "Either their phones are disconnected, or the voicemail message is a random rap song that never actually goes to voicemail!" Another time one of the TANF clients arrived late, and seemed distracted and a bit sluggish. Gina said she planned to call the woman's

case manager, because “she was probably stoned.” TANF women’s parenting responsibilities were not seen as a legitimate reason for cancelled appointments or showing up disheveled. The SWO website indicates that over 70 percent of the all clients served are single mothers, raising an average of two to three children. TANF clients were all mothers to minor children. However, children weren’t allowed to come along to suiting appointments.

In stark contrast to the experiences of clients referred through required welfare-to-work programs, clients referred through youth-focused non-profits or local community colleges – 17 percent of all clients – were understood to be particularly deserving and pleasant to work with. Compared to all other referral groups, local youth and community college students were the most likely to be doted on by Personal Shoppers, who believed these clients to be hard-working and upwardly mobile. As one Personal Shopper remarked after ending an appointment with a 19-year-old Latina woman, “It’s so refreshing to dress someone who is working hard to have a better life than her parents!” These clients were also frequently described as “fun” and, unlike all other groups, were sometimes convinced by Personal Shoppers to keep trying on outfits, even after they’d already found a full outfit they liked.

The first time I observed this happening was with a petite Asian-American woman named Grace, who was 21 and finishing her Associates degree in accounting. Ritu, her Personal Shopper, had quickly found two full business suits that easily fit Grace, who was a size 2 and thus had many options from which to choose. “You look so adorable!” Ritu exclaimed, after the second suit fit just as well as the first. “Let’s try a few more. This is fun!” Ultimately, Grace tried on six suits, five of which were deemed “adorable” by Ritu, who particularly liked two of the suits. “I can’t decide!” Grace said, after trying both suits on again. Ritu said, “Well let’s try on shoes then. Once you find the shoes you like best, you can figure out which suit goes with them

better.” Grace was again pleased to find that she liked several pairs of shoes. Ultimately she picked her favorite shoes – basic black pumps – and agreed that they looked best with one of the suits. Next came a purse, scarf, and jewelry. Ritu clapped her hands as she surveyed the final look, and then she wrapped everything up while Grace changed. “I put that second pair of shoes you liked in there too!” Ritu said, after which Grace thanked her profusely and gave her a hug. “It was like dressing a doll!” Ritu said after Grace left.

Another time I helped a woman named Rachel, a 24-year-old Latina who had recently moved to the area and was raising her 9-month-old son while trying to finish her degree in biology at a nearby state school. She had just been “certified for blood drawing,” had an interview at a nearby medical clinic, and had been referred by an organization for young mothers. I walked Rachel through the orientation process, and chatted with her a bit while she waited for her appointment to start. I learned that she had moved to “start over” after her son’s father had gone to jail. She vaguely mentioned that she’d also been involved in the “indiscretion” (a federal offense) but was anxious to put it behind her. She said she hoped to be hired full-time because “Who wouldn’t want full-time?” but that she would accept a part-time job if that was the only option. Overhearing this story, Tania, the Personal Shopper working that shift, remarked, “What a survivor! You need a makeover to help jumpstart this new life. You’re going to be Cinderella, and I’ll be the fairy godmother!” Forty-five minutes later, Rachel left with a full business suit, shoes, bag, and jewelry, along with a few “extras”, including a second set of matching earrings and necklace, plus a nice brand name makeup kit that had been donated for a silent auction fundraiser but hadn’t sold.

The remaining 38 percent of clients referred to SWO-WC were sent from a wide variety of non-state social service programs, mostly including job-training programs (25 percent) and

homeless shelters (11 percent), as well as a small number of domestic violence and/or shelters for women who were victims of human trafficking (2 percent). Unlike either the least-liked clients (TANF Ladies) or the most-liked clients (youth), the majority of these clients arrived without any particular reputation preceding them. These clients seemed to be the types of women that volunteers and staff had envisioned helping in their time at SWO. Broadly, this translated to a sense that these clients were generally presumed to be “deserving poor,” largely because they sought help voluntarily. This translated into suiting appointments in which clients were neither overindulged, nor overmanaged. Sessions generally took anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes (longer if the woman was plus-sized or happened to be on the “pickier” side), but with the exception of women referred from domestic violence shelters, who “were sometimes picky about the clothes because they aren’t used to being needy and wearing second-hand stuff.” While they still weren’t allowed to “shop,” they were almost always given the opportunity to select accessories and jewelry to match their interview outfits.

The only exception to the above was what I observed in three cases in which a white client exhibited cultural capital when interacting with their Personal Shoppers. These were clients who refused to settle for unfashionable or outdated suits, or garments that weren’t from well-known brands. Personal Shoppers expressed resentment when these seemingly more cultured women expressed entitlement to decent clothes *and* had the cultural capital to see it through (i.e., they couldn’t be “managed”). It appeared that white women with cultural capital were seen as “undeserving poor” because they didn’t look or act like they were poor. All three of these women left with full business suits, blouses, and all of the accessories (assuming they found options they felt were acceptable). About the domestic violence victim, volunteers said things like, “She was kind of hoity-toity, but I bit my tongue because I think she’s just getting

out of a scary relationship.” In other words, the woman’s status as a victim made her deserving, despite her entitled behavior.

In contrast, both times that young Russian-speaking immigrants had appointments, the volunteers were much less sympathetic. As one left, carrying a bag of very nice items, her Personal Shopper asked, “Why was she even here? She could have just used the clothes she wore when she came in!”, although she was not wearing a suit when she arrived. The other woman, a thin, long-haired blonde wore chic “skinny jeans” fashionably tucked into boots, with a fitted black turtleneck. “Oh great, another gold-digger!” whispered Ritu, who would be working with this client. I raised my eyebrows in confusion, and Ritu clarified, “You, know, a mail-order-bride. These girls come over from Russia looking for a rich man to marry so they don’t have to work.” I found Ritu’s criticisms somewhat ironic, given that Ritu did not work and was supported by her “rich man” husband, a hedge-fund manager.

After a long session that involved many rounds of trying on different clothes, the woman left satisfied, having found a brand name she’d recognized. “If she’s too good for used clothes, then she can just go to Banana Republic next time!” exclaimed Ritu after the appointment. I was surprised that the volunteers resented working with clients who shared similar levels of cultural capital. Yet, this pattern makes more sense when considered in light of the boundary work being done at this site, in terms of gender and class. Perhaps one thing motivating middle- and upper-class SWO Personal Shoppers is the cultivation of a sense of their own superiority over clients – a sense of superiority that was likely disrupted when interacting with clients with cultural capital.

Bodily Capital

Plus-sized women were less likely to receive a full business suit, and the larger the woman was in clothing size, the stronger this effect became. In other words, a woman's body size compounded any inequalities across all other dimensions. Strikingly, over half of all clients served by SWO-WC in 2013 wore clothing size 12 or greater: 24 percent wore sizes 0 through 6, 19 percent wore sizes 8 or 10, 24 percent wore sizes 12 or 14, 25 percent wore sizes 16 through 24, 11 percent wore sizes 26 and larger (6 percent were unknown). In other words, 51 percent of all SWO-WC wore sizes 12 or larger, and these clients were less likely than smaller women to leave with a full business suit. This finding gives a new meaning, and additional frustration, to feminist critiques describing workfare programs as "one size fits all."

During my first weeks at SWO, I was struck by the anti-fat sentiments expressed by Gina, who was plus-sized herself and frequently spoke about her efforts to lose weight. When I first asked Gina to share her insight about which clients were the most difficult, she described "the bigger ladies" as being particularly challenging:

Yeah, we see a lot of heifers in here. I guess that's what happens when you can sit at home all day watching TV, right? Not that I'm skinny or whatever, but you know. Anyway, working with the bigger ladies is always tough because we don't always have much to offer them that fits, and even if we find a perfect suit, they hate the way they look anyway. It's just less fun for anybody, you know? We try to give them extras of other things if we can't do a whole outfit. Sometimes it's just impossible.

Gina was quite right that plus-size clients were less likely to receive full outfits. Compared to women size 6 or smaller who left with a full suit 100 percent of the time (and similar rates for sizes 8 or 10), this likelihood decreased rapidly for women larger than size 10. In fact, in only *one* instance did I observe a woman sized above 20 leave with a full suit. In this case, the client, a white woman who wore size 22 and was interviewing to be a short-order chef, happened to be

thrilled to leave with a suit jacket other clients had refused to wear because it was “way too masculine,” and also loved the clunky size 10 “wingtip” shoes she’d chosen from a few options.

More typical, however, were cases such as the following, from my field notes:
A tall African-American woman in her late thirties who wore size 16 came for an appointment after she was hired for a job at a “nice restaurant.” Her name was Megan. She’d been referred by a local “hiring hall” nonprofit. Right after meeting Joyce, her Personal Shopper, Megan announced that she was starting work the next day and was required to wear a black dress and suit jacket when being the hostess, but black pants with a black button-up shirt on days that she worked behind the bar. Joyce found two size 16 black dresses in the back room, and both fit quite well. Megan said she felt “weird” in both of the dresses (to which Joyce said, “Oh, you’re just not used to wearing dresses like this!”), but agreed that one of them was comfortable and professional. Joyce found a pair of black pumps, size 8, which Megan also liked very much. Turning next to the search for a black pants suit, Joyce only found *one* full black suit that was size 16. The jacket fit beautifully, and Megan said she “liked this a lot!”, but the pants wouldn’t button.

Joyce asked me if I could come to the back room to help find more options. We found two black suit jackets (sizes 14 and 18), and one pair of black pants, size 16. SWO-WC did not have any black blouses larger than size Medium. I suggested that Megan try the jackets on with the dress she’d chosen, since she could wear both together. Of these options, the size 14 jacket was too small and the size 18 jacket was too big.

When the pants didn’t button, Megan started to panic, saying over and over that she was going to get fired tomorrow if she showed up out of uniform. I asked if she could wear the black dress on her first day, but she insisted that the hiring manager was very clear about the dress code. After looking at herself in the mirror, she walked over to one of the closets and looked through the black suits. We let her. There was no use in saying no. After seeing that we didn’t have any matching black suits above size 14, she repeated, “I’m going to get fired if I don’t have a jacket, but I really liked that other jacket more” [referring to the size 16 jacket]. We weren’t supposed to “break up” any matching suits, but Joyce said, “Oh, you can have it honey. And take that second dress too. It wasn’t your favorite, but it looked nice.” Then she turned to me and said, “Nobody needs to know. Just put the pants in the back.” Megan thanked Joyce for “trying so hard” but left looking terrified.

This example was a fairly typical experience for plus-sized women in the following three ways. First, Megan left with some items, but not everything that she needed to show up at work the

next day. Second, her Personal Shopper spent the entire 45 minutes searching in vain for a full outfit and then broke the rules to give Megan an extra dress and the suit jacket she liked best, even though this required breaking up a matched business suit.

In another instance, Jenny, a Latina woman in her late 20s who wore size 26 and had been referred by a church organization, similarly did not have many options from which to choose. One of Jenny's eyes was clouded over, causing me to wonder if she had left an abusive partner. She was interviewing for a position as an administrative assistant. After requesting dark colors, Jenny seemed relieved when she found a pair of black rayon slacks with an elastic waistband in the back room. "These are, like, for old ladies, but who cares? They fit!" she said. A suit jacket and blouse posed a greater challenge, so she ultimately ended up with a bright pink knit sweater (not a cardigan) with three-quarter-length sleeves. It was tight, but had some stretch. "See if you can find a tank top to wear underneath it," encouraged Beth, her Personal Shopper. Jenny did not complain about not receiving a blouse or shoes, and instead said she was "relieved that *anything* fit."

I noticed that women at the higher end of the sizing scale, particularly those who wore size 20 or greater, were less likely than thinner plus-sized women to express frustration during their appointments, even after trying on many items that didn't fit. The largest women were typically deferential, often saying things like "I don't care what it looks like, as long as it fits," and sometimes actually apologized to Personal Shoppers for being so difficult. It is possible that these expressions of deference and gratitude caused Personal Shoppers to view these clients as deserving, perhaps explaining why very large women were treated with kindness and often received extras.

On the other hand, women who were size 12, 14, or 16 were much more likely to express frustration if they didn't like the available choices. Indeed, even when they did leave with full outfits, plus-sized women were likely to wear clothes that technically "fit" but were more outdated, matronly, more obviously used, fit poorly, or did not fit basic requirements or requests (i.e., "dark colors" or "no patterns please"). One time, a size 16 woman left her appointment frustrated because she didn't like the way she looked in the suit she ended up with, which was brown and had a long skirt for the bottom piece, instead of the black pantsuit she had requested. I mentioned this to Gina, who said, "I don't know why they get upset for no reason. Everything looks the same on them, 'lipstick on a pig' and all that, you know?" Describing plus-sized women in this way reinforces their marginalization and deprives them of agency within the very space designed to support them.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Successful Women's Outfitters is perhaps the most well-known nonprofit organization dedicated to evening the odds for disadvantaged women entering the workforce by providing them with professional attire for job interviews. This paper examined the processes by which the work of this woman-run nonprofit challenged some gendered inequities, while reifying others. By analyzing the connections between SWO policies, procedures, and everyday service interactions between clients and volunteer Personal Shoppers, my findings fit within a broader feminist literature that cautions against an "easy reading" of philanthropic efforts to promote social change, as the very programs intended to help remedy social inequalities are not exempt from also reinforcing inequalities.

SWO's practices for filtering donated garments set up middle- and upper-class volunteers as the arbiters of good taste. By rejecting garments that weren't "good enough" *and* those that were "too good," SWO defined and enforced both the upper and lower boundaries of respectable taste. By framing certain garments as "a waste on" or "too good for" lower-class women, volunteers reproduced moral distinctions between different types of women, while using their role as "taste brokers" to cultivate a certain kind of respectable poor woman, namely the kind that was hard-working and upwardly mobile but did not reach too high. I argue that this constitutes a form of class gatekeeping.

SWO's careful cultivation of a high-end "boutique" aesthetic produced what might be described as a Goffmanian dramaturgy, in which volunteer personal stylists played the role of attentive salespersons, and clients played the role of makeover recipient. This cultivated context helped obscure the extent to which SWO staff and volunteers maintained rigid control over clients' expectations and behaviors. By adopting the role of excited and docile makeover recipients, clients became vulnerable to the sneaky creep of symbolic violence; clients who challenged Personal Shoppers' garment choices were subtly reminded of their inferior taste and lack of experience in "the business world."

In their roles as "street-level bureaucrats," SWO staff and volunteers controlled the distribution of symbolic and material resources. I found that a client's access to professional clothing (objectified cultural capital) was predicated upon whether she was perceived as already possessing upwardly mobile mannerisms (*habitus*) and upon having a sufficiently middle-class body (bodily capital). This pattern reproduced already-existing inequalities along the lines of class, race, and body size, and suggests that a person's attempted acquisition of the higher-status

habitus, bodily capital, and objectified cultural capital needed to become a skilled aesthetic laborer may be fraught with social and symbolic boundaries.

Finally, my finding that plus-sized clients were much less likely than their thinner sisters to receive full interview outfits gave new meaning, and additional frustration, to feminist critiques describing workfare programs as inadequately “one size fits all.” It might be argued that SWO’s relative lack of plus-sized clothing compared to its majority plus-size clientele was due to the unfortunate dearth of plus size fashion options in the broader market. This is likely part of the story, but I argue that it is more concerning that SWO largely ignored this issue in the face of obvious disparity. Importantly, this finding suggests that limited access to objectified cultural capital, in the form of fashion, may be one reason that fatness is impoverishing.

In closing, SWO rightly takes seriously the importance of workers’ aesthetic capacities in gaining employment. And yet the SWO organization is structured in a way that allows for the perpetuation of power hierarchies between women. The program allows for the further entrenchment of notions of “good” versus “bad” welfare recipients, perpetuating the image of the “welfare queen” and therefore reinforcing stereotypes of poor, single, predominantly African-American mothers as lazy and immoral. As such, efforts to disrupt systems of poverty and disadvantage instead play into the cycle.

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Chapter 2

Living Mannequins: How Fit Models Accomplish Aesthetic Labor

This paper examines the aesthetic labor of “fit models” working in the U.S. fashion/garment industry. Unlike fashion models, fit models do not appear in product advertising or walk on couture runways, but are instead used to assess the fit of prototype garments during the clothing production process. Described by industry insiders as “living mannequins,” fit models – at least in theory – must have “perfect” body measurements in order to secure work. Yet, as will be argued in this paper, perfect measurements are “necessary but not sufficient” at the point of hire, and the expectation that fit models will maintain exact measurements to stay employed seems loosely enforced in practice.

Drawing on interviews with fit models and those who work with them, along with content analysis of job advertisements for fit models, I find that, although a fit model’s bodily measurements (i.e., her *bodily capital*) are critical for her to “get a foot in the door,” a fit model’s job security ultimately depends on her ability to professionally and congenially provide expert knowledge on garment fit (i.e., her *embodied cultural capital*). This expert knowledge – and the workplace relationships that develop through its communication – can protect fit models from losing their jobs, even when “perfect” body measurements are not maintained. This paper contributes to understandings of aesthetic labor by emphasizing the power of embodied cultural capital, which can protect aesthetic laborers when their bodily capital diminishes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Feminist scholars interested in work and embodiment have built upon Arlie Hochschild’s

(1983) classic study of emotional labor, as well as Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus, to illustrate that – in addition to their feelings – workers' *bodies* may also be commodified in the workplace. This research has introduced the concept of “aesthetic labor” (Nickson et al. 2003, Warhurst et al. 2000, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003, Wolkowitz 2006), noting that workplaces draw on unique gendered, raced, and classed brand images that directly determine which workers will be hired to do what jobs, and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job. First conceived by Warhurst et al. (2000), aesthetic labor includes “a worker's deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness,” (Williams and Connell 2010), a list illustrating that aesthetic labor is accomplished through a combination of mannerisms and physical appearance.

Stated another way, aesthetic labor requires that workers have both the right *habitus/embodied cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986) and also the right *bodily capital* (Wacquant 1995, Wacquant 2004). Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept of cultural capital to illustrate how non-economic assets contribute to social status. According to Bourdieu, habitus and embodied cultural capital (one of three types of cultural capital) specifically refers to “competencies” or skills that cannot be separated from – or that are embodied by – their bearer. This concept relates to aesthetic labor through workers' “mannerisms,” “deportment,” and “style” – all which may be understood as forms of embodied cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's work, Wacquant (1995; 2004) introduced the concept of bodily capital to describe how boxers meticulously monitor their bodies in preparation for a match, illustrating the body itself as a form of capital. Through their bodily capital, individuals cultivate “a set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value” (Wacquant 1995, p. 67) in a given social world. Bodily capital is linked to aesthetic labor when workers manage and monitor their bodies in order to

meet workplace expectations.

Research on aesthetic labor shows that organizations consider aesthetics and “style” when recruiting employees, preferring to hire workers whose embodied capacities and attributes – or habitus (Bourdieu 1984) – already conform to their brand image. After hire, employers may continue to refine workers’ embodied dispositions through training in appropriate service styles and/or through rules regulating workplace dress and cosmetic styling. Workers who do not embody brand aesthetics may be relegated to non-visible jobs, or even fired (assuming that they were hired in the first place). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker’s gender, ethnicity, age, body type, or class-imbued habitus limit his or her ability to meet a particular organization’s aesthetic standards (Williams and Connell 2010, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003).

Research on aesthetic labor has typically focused on workers who perform interactive service work, such as exotic dancers (Trautner 2005); or salespersons at cosmetic counters (Lan 2003), mainstream department stores (Hanser 2008), or upscale retail stores (Williams and Connell 2010). However, the concepts of aesthetic labor and bodily capital have also been used to specifically examine the work of *fashion models* (Czerniawski 2012, Entwistle 2002, Entwistle and Wissinger 2006, Entwistle and Wissinger 2012, Godart and Mears 2009, Mears and Finlay 2005, Mears 2008, Mears 2010, Mears 2011).

Modeling is a challenging and sociologically interesting occupation because – despite being associated with glamour and high status – employment for most models is irregular, the physical demands are great, the work is often degrading, and the competition is fierce (Mears 2005). As explained by Mears (2005), fashion modeling “is an occupation that requires

[workers] to be passive and silent at work while paying careful attention to the management of their ‘bodily capital’” (p. 318).

The sociological research on models illustrates that models do not simply *have* bodily capital but must constantly manage their bodies to maintain bodily capital, both on the job and while off the clock; as “freelance aesthetic laborers,” models “cannot walk away from their product, which is their entire embodied self” (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006 p. 774). Further, these scholars draw on the case of fashion models to argue that aesthetic labor is not simply superficial work on the body’s surface, but involves the entire embodied self, including the emotional self: “Models acknowledge that to those viewing them, they may be nothing more than ‘paper dolls’ – pretty objects adorned with the products that others wish to sell – but they insist that to succeed as a model also takes the ability to charm agents, clients, photographers, and even, albeit indirectly, the prospective consumers of these products,” (Mears and Finlay 2005:318). Despite performing work “that mostly consists of the passive display of physical beauty,” by emphasizing their emotional labor, models “transform themselves, in their own eyes at least, from passive objects into active subjects – from those who are acted upon into those who act,” (Mears and Finlay 2005:319).

The case of fit modeling offers analytical leverage for developing our understanding of the work of modeling. For example, fashion modeling has long been critiqued by feminist scholars for promoting an increasingly emaciated beauty standard (Bordo 2004), with runway models “typically at least 5’9” with measurements close to 34” bust, 24” waist, 34” hips,” (Godart and Mears 2009). In contrast, fit models purportedly come “in all shapes and sizes,” so that different fit models can represent the size standards for different brands. Yet, despite this suggested flexibility in acceptable bodies, each fit model is expected to strictly maintain his/her

own body measurements, which suggests that a similar level of bodily discipline may be required. While *fashion* models' bodily capital is linked to both their body size/shape and the achievement of a desired (yet amorphous) "look," fit models are, at least in theory, only required to maintain ideal body measurements.

Fit models, like fashion models, operate in a "winner-takes-all" market, in which most are unable to "make it" on modeling work alone, while a select few are enormously successful (Mears 2011, Rosen 1981). While fit-modeling jobs lack the glamour and prestige associated with fashion modeling, the hourly pay is reportedly better and the "retirement age" is certainly much older. While fashion models are often considered "too old" by their mid-twenties, fit models are known to work well into their 30s, 40s, and even 50s. Indeed, in Mears' (2011) research, the highest paid model in her study was a fifty-two-year-old fit model who "ma[de] \$500/hour and work[ed] every day" (p. 48).

Finally, unlike fashion models, fit models' bodies are not used to *sell* cultural products but, rather, to *produce* them. This distinction suggests that, despite also being "freelance aesthetic laborers," fit models may be given more opportunities to be active subjects in their jobs. Do these patterns cause intensified or lessened management of bodily capital? Further, to what extent does fit modeling require emotional labor or embodied cultural capital?

DATA AND ANALYSIS

To answer these questions, this paper draws on content analysis of 77 online job advertisements for fit models, from interviews with fit models and those who work with them (N = 17), as well as from observation of 3 "fit sessions" at two different fashion firms. My interest in the case of fit models grew inductively; while collecting general interview data on the

production of clothing size standards in the U.S. fashion industry, my interviewees repeatedly referred to fit models as having a key role in this process.

The 77 online job advertisements were collected by searching online job banks – including Craigslist (www.craigslist.com), Simply Hired (www.simplyhired.com), and Women’s Wear Daily (www.wwd.com) – using the search term “fit model”. While many of the resulting ads came from fashion firms looking for fit models, several ads also came from modeling agencies. Because both fashion firms and modeling agencies used job advertisements to recruit fit models, this method captured the main pathway through which a fit model would attain employment or representation. The exception to this would be if an individual showed up to a modeling agency casting call and was “discovered” as a fit model. I included jobs posted between 11/14/2011 and 1/9/2012. After excluding jobs requesting child fit models, my sample contained 77 distinct fit model job advertisements. Of these, the vast majority (64, or 83%) requested female fit models, with 13 (17%) requesting male fit models. Twenty-five of the advertised jobs were located in New York City, 10 were based in Los Angeles, and 42 were located in other metropolitan areas. The majority (88 percent) of the 77 fit model jobs were advertised by fashion firms and 9 (12 percent) of the jobs were posted by modeling agencies.

Job advertisements were coded for: date of the job posting, whether the job was advertised by a fashion firm or a modeling agency, the city in which the job was located, the gender requested, the requested measurements (height, bust, waist, and lower-hip measurements for women, and height, chest, waist, and lower-hip measurements for men), whether or not the employer required job applicants to submit a photo – and, if so, whether a headshot and/or full body shot was requested – whether or not the employer required prior experience, whether the job was advertised as part time or full time, whether the work was described as regular or

required “flexibility”, the advertised pay rate, and if there were any additional requirements for the job. I recorded these data directly into SPSS statistical software for ease of analysis.

I interviewed 7 fashion merchandisers, 3 fit models, 2 Co-CEOs/Co-founders of a small online fashion firm, 1 fit model booker, 1 modeling scout, 1 fashion design director, 1 fashion designer, and 1 financial analyst at a fashion firm. All of the interview subjects were based in West Coast U.S. cities. To supplement my three interviews with fit models (and to triangulate themes brought up in all interviews), I additionally draw from secondary data sources, including 1 academic journal article (Czerniawski 2012), 1 blog (Anonymous 2010), and 1 newspaper article in which fit models were interviewed. When referring to secondary data, I cite the original source. I also observed three “fit sessions” (meetings in which prototype garments are assessed, typically including fashion designers, fashion merchants, and one fit model), including two at a large multi-national fashion firm and one at a small online fashion firm, both located in a West Coast city in the United States.

Prior to working in academia, I worked at 2 different multi-national fashion firms as a merchandiser in women’s attire. To build the interview sample, I contacted former co-workers and asked for help identifying potential interviewees who could talk about clothing size standards. I then asked interviewees to refer me to additional potential interviewees, creating a snowball sample. Interviewees were asked general questions about their jobs, and how their work related to the production of clothing size standards. Because many interviewees mentioned fit models, I began asking additional questions about fit models specifically, such as “What attributes make a person a great fit model?”, “How important is a fit model’s personality?”, and “What happens if a fit model’s measurements are off?” Interviews generally lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were recorded onto a digital audio-recorder, and then transcribed verbatim.

The inductive interview and field notes analysis involved reading each of the interview transcripts and my field notes several times and constructing “theme sheets” as different themes emerged.

One weakness of this study is rooted in its external validity. Although the job advertisements I analyzed represent the entirety of the U.S. fashion industry, all interviews and participant observations took place in one of two major West Coast U.S. cities. While both of these cities house multiple multi-national fashion firms and are considered to be key players in the U.S. fashion industry, both in terms of garment production and cultural influence, it is widely acknowledged that New York City, NY is the “fashion capital” of the United States. Compared to New York City, the fashion market in which I recruited and accessed my interview subjects and participant observations was notably smaller; both the number of fashion firms and the number of fit models were relatively smaller. Thus, my interview and observational findings may be region or market-specific, and should be considered in light of this.

FINDINGS

The data suggest that, although a fit model’s measurements (i.e., her *bodily capital*) are critical for her to “get a foot in the door,” a fit model’s job security ultimately depends on her ability to professionally and congenially provide expert knowledge on garment fit (i.e., her *embodied cultural capital*). This expert knowledge – and the workplace relationships that develop through its communication – seems to protect some fit models from losing their jobs, even in cases when “perfect” body measurements are not maintained. Below, I present these findings in two sections. The first section describes expectations for bodily capital, and how fit

models manage their bodily capital. In the second section, I discuss expectations for embodied cultural capital, and draw on examples illustrating its influence.

Being a Fit Model

“What is a fit model? Fit models are like live mannequins [...] who try on clothes so manufacturers can fit them to the human frame.” So begins an advertisement for “Male Fit Model Needed - \$40/hour.” Another ad – for a “Temporary Part-Time Size 18W Plus Female Fit Model - \$25/hour” similarly explained, “The Fit Model will be responsible for trying on sample garments that represent a standard customer size and providing feedback regarding fit and feel of the garment as requested.” These two examples illustrate several aspects of the work involved in being a fit model: that both men and women have these jobs; that fit models are “live mannequins” in a “standard customer size” who help garment manufacturers assess garment fit; that the work is mostly temporary, part-time, and (given this) poorly paid. Indeed, of the 77 job advertisements coded, only 5 percent offered “full time” work, and 70 percent required job applicants to “have a flexible schedule” or to be “on-call” at any time during the workweek. Tigr, a 39-year-old “mixed race” plus-size fit model, described her modeling work as “very, very part-time.” Kara, a fit model booker for a San Francisco modeling agency, similarly explained,

I wouldn't even classify it as a part-time job. I always kind of refer to it as just like a side gig. The majority of my fit models have full-time Monday through Friday working-during-business-hours jobs, because even my top-booking fit models... well... I still wouldn't consider that a part-time job because there's no regularity in it. A lot of my models are sacrificing their lunch hours, time after – or maybe during – work, or [time] with their spouses and children. It's a big responsibility [...] so a lot of times fit models are like, *I need to pay my rent*, and I'm thinking, well, this is not the job that's gonna pay your rent. I once placed a fit model for an in-house salary position, which is kind of like the best job you could get as a fit model. I negotiated a six-figure salary for her. That's the rare

crème de la crème. Every fit model I meet wants that position, but ... it's pretty rare.

When I asked Kara to explain why fit modeling is a good “side gig”, she explained that it was pretty good pay for a few hours of easy work. Indeed, of the advertisements analyzed that mentioned a pay rate, the casting calls advertised “\$500.00/day to \$150/hr (minus 20% agency fee)”, although the fashion firms never offered more than \$50/hour.

Managing Bodily Capital

Another job advertisement defines the job: “What is a fit model? You try on our clothes so we can see if they fit you the way they were designed to fit. There is just one catch. You have to be just the right size.” Indeed, almost all job advertisements described the exact bodily measurements required for the position, and suggested that these measurements made up the most important requirement for the job. For example, an ad by an “All-American Clothing Company” explained that, “Only females who fit our measurement criteria within ¼ inch and supply a photo will be considered.” Other ads frequently warned, “If you are not the EXACT following measurements, please do not apply!” As explained by Kara, “The measurements on paper is what gets the fit model a foot in the door.”

Unlike in fashion modeling, fit models are required in a *variety* of body types and sizes. Illustrating this, one modeling agency gleefully explained that, “Women come in a lot of sizes and shapes, which is why fit modeling is so FUN. Designers look for petites, juniors, missy, tall, and plus-sized women. Plus-size models especially vary in body shape. Designers will look for curvy, evenly proportioned, or pear shaped women.” Another modeling agency warns potential models, “Don’t try to fake your measurements – if you’re not the size, you’re not the size. There are accounts for every size and shape; find the ones that suit your natural body-type.”

This wider variation in measurements and body type can be seen below in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 shows the variation in requested body measurements across all the fit model job advertisements. Taking height, for example, job descriptions asked for female fit models ranging from 61.5 to 70.5 inches, and with waist measurements ranging from 24 inches to 41 inches. Similarly, job descriptions asked for male fit models ranging from 67.75 inches to 73 inches in height, and between 30 inches and 38 inches in waist.

Table 2 further illustrates the variety of body types and relative *proportions* requested by the job advertisements by examining ratios between different body measurements. For example, the “Bust/Hip Ratio” for women fit models ranged from 0.91 to 1.08, meaning that some jobs desired a fit model whose bust measurement was less than her hip measurement, while other jobs desired the exact opposite.

Yet, despite the greater variety of bodies compared to fashion modeling, the bodies required for fit modeling are still somewhat rare: as explained by Kara, “Clients are unfortunately looking for that perfect body which doesn’t really exist. So I’m always trying to find the closest real version of that ideal body shape they’re looking for.” Once this “closest version of that ideal body shape” has been found in a fit model, that model is now expected to maintain his/her measurements. As one job advertisement warns, “candidate must meet and maintain the following measurement range AT ALL TIMES!”

This need to maintain exact measurements motivates a hiring preference for “natural” bodies, rather than those that need to diet excessively to maintain measurements. One modeling agency explains, “Always be the size you are; do not under any circumstances try to gain or lose inches to fit a size. We can’t tell you how often girls make this mistake, and when they do no one wins; trying to fake it means the next time around your client is sure to be disappointed. Be the

size you are and your clients will thank you for your consistency with repeat business.” Similarly, Kara states that she always looks “for someone who has a regular workout routine. And she doesn’t have to be a gym freak or anything like that, but just someone who enjoys some kind of physical activity because I know they’re gonna do it consistently, which means their body will most likely stay exactly the way it was when I met them.”

Of course, bodies do change. Kara complained, “It’s very hard to find fit models who are not just the right size but who can maintain their measurements. In print modeling you always have to be going down in measurements, but for fit modeling you have to stay the same whether that means losing or gaining weight, which can oftentimes be harder, you know. You have to have a very balanced exercise program and diet and be very mindful.”

Diana, a plus-sized fit model, described the frustration and work required to maintain her figure.

I struggle – I mean, I’m a big girl, but I have to struggle to keep my measurements, I used to have to work out with trainers to keep certain measurements. I had to worry about going up a half an inch in one area versus a half an inch or an inch somewhere else, or lose. Gain, lose. To give a good example, I was a big swimmer in college and I loved swimming, but I’d have to cut back on doing that type of exercise for certain times of the years because my biceps are already right on par with the spec that we create at [my employer]. And then as soon as I start swimming, it gets too small. So I cut back on some things that I enjoy, and then I do a lot of things I don’t enjoy. I remember going to a trainer one time, and he was like, oh, you – you know, we can – just automatically thought I was there for losing weight. And I said, oh, I don’t wanna lose weight. I just wanna get my arm a little bigger and I wanna get my hip down a little – about two inches. He couldn’t understand the concept of that. And I’m like, well, I get paid to be the size that I am, and, you know, I just wanna be healthy...[Laughs]

Despite these efforts, Diana was unable to maintain her measurements when she went through a “personal issue” and lost weight.

In the past year, I went through a kind of personal issue, and I lost almost 24 pounds, which is almost a full size. I could not keep on weight. And I – I’m – I’ve always – At [my main client] I’ve always been a little on the large end of the spec

for my hip, and I actually went – I dropped so much weight that it went under and the clothes fit completely different. I went on an ice cream diet. I’m almost embarrassed to say that. Now I went back up. I went over. I was enjoying that way too much, so...[Laughs] I put on like 20 pounds in like a month and a half. It was really probably very unhealthy.

Interestingly, despite losing “almost 24 pounds,” and being a full size under the ideal fit, Diana was able to keep her job. I will return to this finding below. Another fit model, interviewed on a fashion blog, says, “Before I signed with my agency, I was actually told to gain at least 5 pounds. Being 5 ft 9 inches, weighing about 130, I never thought I would hear an agency say gain weight but they did,” (Anonymous 2010).

Models who aren’t able to maintain their measurements – or whose bodies change *even if their measurements stay the same* – do risk losing their jobs. A fashion merchant relayed the following story to me:

We always fit our denim on one woman. Um, her name was Lorrie Anne. She was like the fit model for us forever and ever and ever, but she started getting older. And she was maybe mid-30s, um, and we weren’t getting the fits on her that we used to. Her weight hadn’t changed, but her body composition had changed a little bit. Her measurements hadn’t really changed, but it was the softness of her body had changed. Like as you age your body just changes a little bit. And we saw it in fits and they let her go. It was really hard because this was someone who they fit on forever and ever and ever and she was a full-time employee. I mean, it’s awful, but it’s their job to maintain and she was getting older. So they replaced her with a girl that we were getting better fits on. It is a harsh world, the world of fit models. Your body changes just a little bit and you’re out.

In this case, changing body “composition” led to a lost job. Yet, as will be described in greater detail below, maintaining measurements makes up only one part of a fit model’s job security.

Interestingly, one type of bodily capital typically expected of fashion models was *not* expected of fit models: that of awareness and ease of one’s bodily movement. As explained by a model scout, “When I’m looking for a girl for catwalk, or even just for a photo shoot, she’s got to know how to move. Fit models don’t. They just need to be the right size and know how to get

along with folks.” The importance of a fit model’s ability to “get along with folks” is the focus of the following section.

Producing Expert Knowledge via Embodied Cultural Capital

Time and time again, when interviewing people who routinely work with fit models, I was told of the importance of working with fit models who could “give good feedback.” Thus, a talent agency advised potential job applicants that, “being a fit model isn’t just about using your body. It’s about using your mind as well.” The design director at a large multi-national fashion firm similarly told me that, “a good fit model not only has to fit [the garments], but also be able to discuss kind of the specific call-outs as far comfort, as far as aesthetics, as far as feel, and as far as versatility. So they have to be very knowledgeable about fabrication and how it drapes on the body and knowing your body type.” The author of a fashion blog uses this logic to explain why fit models are “worth the hassle” (compared to using a dress form with unchanging measurements). She asserted that getting great feedback from fit models “is key for us designers. Unlike a body/tailor form, the fit model can tell us if something itches or rides up. We actually get feedback, which is priceless!” (Anonymous 2010).

Providing feedback requires that fit models possess not just an opinion, but *expert knowledge* about both garments and their own bodies. One talent agency, for example, suggests the following to potential fit models:

Be mindful of how your shape changes from month to month. If you give or take an inch, be upfront with your clients. Your attention to slight fluctuations in your shape is immensely helpful to designers.” Further, fit models should “become familiar with measurements and sizing appropriate to your accounts. If you specialize in lingerie, be knowledgeable in that area. The same goes for jeans, sportswear, etc. Coming armed with the right knowledge gives you the extra edge, makes you more helpful and will help you maintain your accounts for years to come.

Tigra similarly explained:

I think that was valuable to them, [my] insight into the industry about everything from fabric ordering to where you look for the buttons, or the cost of production if you add a button hole or if you add a hole for a belt loop or something like that. I gained so much insight on that over the years [...] that I could also be the one to say, “Well, what about this instead?” or, “Yeah, I see what you’re saying about how that drives up the cost, but it makes the dress better, and will more people buy it?”

Diana further argued that giving knowledgeable feedback might, in some ways, be *more* important than measurements:

I suppose giving good feedback is most important. The most – I mean, *anybody* can try on clothes, I suppose. I think that over the years it’s – I’ve learned a pattern of what exactly a technical designer or designer is looking for. What the critical points are of things that need to be checked. I know exactly where clothes should land, you know, to little freckles on my body.

Here we see that providing feedback to designers, in the form of expert knowledge, allows fit models to understand themselves as active agents in the clothing production process, rather than as passive, docile bodies. This finding is similar to Mears’ (2005) argument that fashion models’ emotional labor provides them a sense of dignity despite constant objectification, allowing them to “define modeling as a job that takes effort, energy, and intelligence,” (p. 339).

A standard-sized fit model interviewed on a modeling blog describes her experience of this, saying:

I feel that with all my relationships in my career that my opinion is highly respected and very valued. My clients listen to what I have to say about the garment and use it to their best advantage to try and reach what the customer is looking for through my thoughts, and feedback. (Anonymous 2010)

Tigra echoed this experience, saying, “You know, I kind of went into it thinking I was gonna be sort of a moving mannequin, but I developed this sense of pride for the things that we were developing.” By referring to “we” instead of “they,” when describing the persons developing the

clothing, Tigra conveys her sense of agency, ownership and collaboration in the production process. Further describing her feelings on this matter, she continued, saying:

The relationship I developed with [my coworkers], their level of involving me in consulting about the clothes, and how much I felt like a valuable contributor to the team definitely made it such that [...] I would've volunteered to do it.

Fit models' sense of agency and contribution echoes Mears' (2005) finding that fashion models' emotional labor provides them a sense of dignity despite constant objectification, allowing them to "define modeling as a job that takes effort, energy, and intelligence," (p. 339).

However, unlike Mears' research on fashion models, in which photographers and model bookers often objectified the models, my data show that fit models' coworkers *agree* that they are valued collaborators in the clothing production process; designers, especially, report taking fit models' insights and suggestions quite seriously:

Finding the right fit model is always a challenge. Maybe your customer is smaller and shorter than average, or maybe she is curvier, perhaps she is a tad younger and smaller in the chest and narrower in the hips and shoulders – whatever your need, once you find the right model, listen, listen, and listen. This is why you chose them, so not only do you need to visually examine every detail, but listen. The model's feedback can be crucial. (Anonymous 2010)

Designers' recognition of fit models' active role in the production process is a stark contrast to previous work arguing that models' agency and personhood is largely rendered obsolete by an industry in which they are thought of as "just a body," (Czerniawski 2012:136).

However, designers working with fit models do caution that expert knowledge, alone, does not qualify as "good feedback" in the views of designers, unless it is delivered in the correct manner; giving "good feedback" requires not only a knowledgeable opinion (preferably from an "experienced fit model" with "a good sense of style") but also just the right demeanor when providing that expert opinion. Job advertisements requested fit models using a wide variety of incredibly specific personal attributes. One, for example, asked for fit models who are

“professional; punctual; organized; personable; honest; interest in fashion and technical design/pattern-making skills are beneficial but not required.” Another prefers fit models who are “fashion-savvy, hard working, and fun,” and who have the “ability to communicate with all levels of management that require a professional demeanor.” Not being able to display these characteristics at will is a “kiss of death” for fit models. As Kara, the fit model booker, explained,

[I]f you’re not a friendly, pleasant person, then chances are the design team doesn’t want to be around you. You need a level of professionalism. So in terms of personality, it’s gotta be someone who’s somewhat extroverted, has a pleasant personality in the sense where, you know, they’re not gonna be mousy or shy – I want someone that actually wants to give feedback. And that technical feedback is what allows these designers to perfect that garment. So the fit model has to really be able to communicate every little thing that they’re noticing while *not* commenting on the personal like or dislike of that style. And that’s one thing – You know, models will say, oh, so I just tell them if I like it or not? Well, no, it’s not if you would personally wear it.

Echoing the importance of knowing exactly what to say and also when to say it, another modeling agency cautions, “DON’T talk too much. Your job is to be a living mannequin. When your client wants feedback, they’ll ask you. Until then, keep your opinions to yourself. When they do ask you, be polite, knowledgeable, and succinct in your responses.”

Can providing great feedback in the appropriate demeanor and developing relationships with coworkers actually protect a fit model from losing her job even if her body measurements are off? The answer: at least sometimes. As explained by one fashion designer, “I know for sure it has happened. And, you know, design teams get used to their models and they don’t like to change fit models, so sometimes I’ll see design teams kind of working around a fit model.” A fashion merchant echoed this, saying,

I think it’s always nice [when we work around a fit model] – I’ve seen a couple fit models where, you know, you kind of have the chart showing what their measurements are, and if they are off significantly in one

particular spec, you're kind of always – you know, the merchants and the technical people and designers are kind of always mentally adjusting for like, you know, you'll look at something and you'll have it on them. You'll be like, oh, wow, that looks really tight in the hip or whatever, and then they'll be like, oh, remember on her chart she's $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch over spec. And then everyone will be like, oh, oh, oh, oh, OK.

Tigra reported a similar experience, and specifically emphasized that she believed the “meaningful relationships” she had developed with her coworkers was the reason her job was protected (emphasis added by author):

Tigra: I was losing weight because of stress, and, honestly, probably because I had started smoking clove cigarettes. [...] We were trying something on, and it wasn't [fitting] the way that it quite usually does. *Because of the relationship that I had with them*, we made some adjustments, you know? I was their size 18 or 20 when I started, and I think by the time or by our last session that we did together, I was probably at the top of their 16 instead of at the bottom of their 18.

Author: Can you explain this “relationship” a bit more?

Tigra: My sense is that there are other companies that would've just been like, well, “we need to get another 18, 20 in here! It's been nice knowing you.” But *we had developed so much of our relationship about feedback on the clothes and me knowing what they were trying to do, and it had just been such a long and meaningful relationship* that it – you know, I'd say if I had gotten out of a plus-size range, obviously, [...] *but as long as I was still in a size that they sold, it was probably still gonna be me.*

Tigra's confidence that her job would be protected “as long as [she] was in a size they sold,” conflicts with much more stringent expectations described in job advertisements which suggested that a models' bodily measurements should not vary more than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch away from spec.

Fit models' impressions of having some job security in spite of weight fluxuations were confirmed by those working with them. Designers' willingness to “work around” a fit model differs from previous research describing both fashion models and fit models, as being treated by designers and model bookers as interchangeable and easily replaceable bodies (Czerniawski

2012, Fasanella 2010, Mears 2011). Czerniawski, for example, reported an instance in which a plus-size fit model working in New York City gained weight and was promptly “replaced [...] with some other ‘big girl.’ ” In contrast, one fashion merchandiser told me a story about a maternity fit model who was “too big” for the standard size because the company used a smaller woman as their fit model for non-maternity clothes. Yet, instead of firing the larger maternity fit model (who wore a fake belly during fittings so that her “bump” stayed the same size!), the design team decided to simply fit clothes more tightly on her, even if this meant that the clothes appeared to fit somewhat poorly:

Now that we have customer comments [on our web page], we learned that [the fit of our Maternity clothes] was skewing huge compared to the market. We found out that our fit model was too large. We were fitting things in more of a blousy way on her instead of in a more fitted way. Um, so what we’ve done is really sort of correct it for that, where everything’s fitting really tightly on the model.

This willingness of the design team to continue working with fit models with diminished cultural capital, is an unexpected finding, and adds complexity to previous data, both from prior work as well as the current study.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to understandings of aesthetic labor by emphasizing the power of embodied cultural capital, which ultimately protects aesthetic laborers when their bodily capital diminishes. It is not a new assertion that modeling requires both bodily capital and emotional labor. Yet, the case of fit models illustrates the extent to which even the most seemingly exacting standards for bodily capital may be mediated, and even superseded, by cultural capital. Stability of a fit model’s job demands that she maintain her measurements within reason, but also that she become an invaluable and articulate source of expert information on garment fit and comfort.

This expert knowledge – and the workplace relationships that develop through its communication – protects fit models from losing their jobs, even in cases when “perfect” body measurements are not maintained.

Thus, it is clear that, in some cases, a fit models’ expert knowledge (her embodied cultural capital), and the work relationships built around it, can be protective even when a models’ bodily measurements vary widely. However, of interest here, and which should be explored in further research, is the question of why some fit models seem to be more protected than others at times when their bodily capital decreases. Given that both Diana and Tigra kept their jobs despite dramatic weight loss, while a standard-sized fit model lost her job when her body composition changed, my interview data offers some evidence that plus-sized fit models may be more protected than standard-sized fit models.

One explanation for this may rest in the fact that fit models need to have high levels of comfort and confidence in their bodies, which may be less common among larger women, given the significant stigma and discrimination they experience in their daily lives. Another explanation may rest in the fact that idealized “proportional” measurements (i.e., an hourglass-shaped bust-waist-hip ratio) are more common among standard-sized women than they are in larger women, who are more likely to have a “pear-shaped” figure, with larger hips and thighs compared to waist and bust. The perceived or real “rarity” of body-confident-hourglass-shaped-expertly-knowledgeable-plus-sized woman may become protective if fashion firms believe that plus-size fit models will be difficult to replace.

However, Czerniawski (2012) reports two cases in which plus-sized female fit models working in New York City were summarily replaced after slight changes in body measurements, suggesting that, in a larger labor market, plus-size fit models may be just as “replaceable” as

their thinner counterparts. Future research on the bodily labor of fit models would benefit from comparative analysis to examine how specific modeling markets shape these processes.

Table 1. Variation in Requested Body Measurements in Job Advertisements for Fit Models

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
WOMEN					
Height	57	61.5	70.5	66.7807	1.6844
Bust	60	31.5	48	36.9062	3.85754
Waist	62	24	41	29.2601	4.13119
Hip	60	33	50	39.0646	4.03779
MEN					
Height	12	67.75	73	71.0208	1.68704
Chest	13	36.27	45	39.8846	2.317
Waist	13	30	38	33.1538	2.21862

Table 2. Variation in Body Proportions in Job Advertisements for Fit Models

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
WOMEN					
Waist/Hip Ratio	60	0.7	0.83	0.7441	0.03047
Bust/Waist Ratio	60	1.05	1.38	1.2662	0.06097
Bust/Hip Ratio	58	0.91	1.08	0.943	0.02686
MEN					
Waist/Hip Ratio	6	0.82	0.87	0.8343	0.02211
Chest/Waist Ratio	13	1.18	1.25	1.2038	0.02438

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Chapter 3

Aesthetic Labor and Emotional Labor in a Women's Plus-Size Clothing Store

Feminist sociologists studying interactive service work have built upon Arlie Hochschild's (1983) classic study of emotional labor, as well as Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus, to illustrate that – in addition to feelings – workers' *bodies* may also be commodified. This work has introduced the concept of “aesthetic labor” (Warhurst et al. 2000, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003, Wolkowitz 2006), noting that workplaces draw on unique gendered, racialized, and classed brand images that directly determine which workers will be hired to do what jobs, and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job. Important for sociologists studying inequality, aesthetic labor reproduces and legitimizes discrimination; as explained by Williams and Connell in their 2010 study of upscale retailers, “in virtually every case, the right aesthetic [for workers to embody] is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white,” (p. 350).

Despite a growing body of work on aesthetic labor, gaps remain in the literature. For one, research examining aesthetic labor has focused predominantly on workplaces that hold clear allegiances to hegemonic beauty standards. Yet, as illustrated by Dove's 2004 “Campaign for Real Beauty,” – in which “ads depicted women who were wrinkled, freckled, pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat,” (Johnston and Taylor 2008) – some companies seem increasingly willing to present themselves as challenging mainstream appearance standards. Several scholars have analyzed how these messages impact consumers (i.e. Johnston and Taylor 2008, Markula 2001), but none have asked how this type of brand strategy impacts front-line service workers. Further, work on aesthetic labor has only occasionally considered how diverse customers' “feeling rules” shape service encounters at the interactional level, tending instead to

emphasize the influence of corporate branding. Yet, it is fair to assume that customers vary in their desires to embody brand ideology – a phenomenon that may be more pronounced when corporate branding challenges deeply held cultural beliefs. How do customers’ diverse “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) shape workers’ aesthetic labor at the interactional level? Are service encounters bounded by top-down brand ideology, or is the customer “always right?”

To answer these questions, I draw from 10 months of fieldwork conducted while working as a paid sales associate at a women’s plus-size clothing store, which I refer to as “Real Style.” Real Style – one outpost of a corporate chain of over 800 stores – was a workplace in which women’s appearance was both commodified and highly salient, yet where mainstream preferences for slenderness were purportedly rejected by corporate branding that instead emphasizes the concept of “Real Women.” Here, body-accepting branding existed in tension with the fat stigma that women experienced in their daily lives. Thus, when the top-down corporate culture of Real Style collided with the bottom-up culture of the *real world*, women had to interactively negotiate these competing cultural repertoires within the constraints of their roles as managers, workers, and customers. By examining service-interactions between these groups in light of corporate branding, this article advances a more nuanced understanding of aesthetic labor while more broadly considering the extent to which experiences of stigma and discrimination may be challenged within consumer contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In her groundbreaking work *The Managed Heart* (1983) Hochschild introduced the concept of “emotional labor,” referring to the effort workers must put forth toward exhibiting the “right” feelings – and inducing the “right” feelings in others – while on the job. At least some

emotional labor is required in all jobs involving interpersonal contact, but it is particularly salient in “interactive service work,” which is found in jobs requiring workers to interact directly with customers or clients (Leidner 1993). Workers’ accomplishment of emotional labor often reinforces gender, race, and class differences (Harvey Wingfield 2010, Hochschild 1983, Williams 2006).

A growing literature on *aesthetic* labor, a term first conceived by Warhurst et al. (2000), builds on Hochschild’s work, along with Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus (referring to mannerisms that are cultivated in childhood and difficult to change in adulthood), to examine organizations’ interest in managing workers’ physical appearance and embodiment of organizational values. As Warhurst et al. (2009: 104) explain, “with many front-line service workers now expected to embody the company image [...] it is the commodification of workers’ corporeality, not just their feelings, that is becoming the analytical focus,” (p. 104). Aesthetic labor includes “a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness,” (Williams and Connell 2010). This list illustrates that aesthetic labor is accomplished through a *combination* of both physical appearance and mannerisms.

Work on aesthetic labor shows that organizations consider aesthetics and “style” when recruiting employees, preferring to hire workers whose embodied capacities and attributes, or habitus, already conform to their brand image. After hire, employers may continue to refine workers’ embodied dispositions through training in appropriate service styles and/or through rules regulating workplace dress and cosmetic styling. Workers who do not embody brand aesthetics may be regulated to non-visible jobs, or even fired (assuming that they were hired in the first place). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker’s gender, ethnicity, body type, or class-imbued habitus limit her ability to meet a particular organization’s

aesthetic standards (Williams and Connell 2010, Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003). Yet, legal scholars note that U.S. labor law generally recognizes employers' rights to require workers' aesthetic conformity to their 'brand image,' so long as this does not clearly discriminate against protected categories (Avery and Crain 2007, see also Rhode 2010); workplace discrimination on the basis of "style" is largely without recourse.

Despite a growing body of research on aesthetic labor, gaps remain in the literature. Below, I highlight two areas that have been under-theorized, and then describe how the case of plus-sized workers at "Real Style" offers insight into these gaps and – more broadly – to our understanding of how stigma and discrimination may be challenged or reinforced within commercial contexts.

Gaps in the Literature on Aesthetic Labor

Research on aesthetic labor has predominantly focused on workplaces that hold clear allegiances to mainstream beauty standards, such as cosmetic counters (Lan 2003), exotic dance clubs (Trautner 2005), fashion modeling (Czerniawski 2011, Mears 2008, Mears 2011), mainstream department stores (Hanser 2008) and upscale retail stores (Williams and Connell 2010). From these cases we see some differences in the aesthetic labor required by different workplaces; while in some jobs women workers are required to appear as sexual fantasies for men (see Hochschild 1983, Loe 1996, Trautner 2005, Wonders and Michalowski 2001), in others they are expected to be beauty and fashion role-models for women (see Lan 2003; Hanser 2008; Williams and Connell 2010). Despite these differences, employers have been consistent in their minimal demand for attractive and gender-conforming appearance and mannerisms. Indeed,

Pettinger (2004) noted that, “[i]mplicit in the definition [of aesthetic labor], and explicit in the reported data, are the connotations ‘aesthetic’ has with beauty and attractiveness” (p. 177).

While a number of scholars have critically assessed the (limited) impact of beauty counter-discourses in consumer contexts – including fitness magazines (Markula 2001), Dove’s Campaign For Real Beauty (Johnston and Taylor 2008), and beauty blogs (Lynch 2011) – none have asked how these discourses impact workers employed by these organizations. This begs the question: what are the experiences of women employed in workplaces that purportedly counter mainstream beauty standards, and do these experiences ultimately challenge or reify broader social inequalities? Do body-accepting brand ideologies reduce workplace discrimination on the basis of appearance? Or, might mainstream cultural ideologies propel conventionally attractive workers to the top of workplace hierarchies in a “glass escalator,” as has been observed for men working in “female” professions (Williams 1992)? Finally, to what extent does body-accepting branding offer real modes of resistance and agency to the women – both workers *and* customers – whose bodies are stigmatized by mainstream ideology?

A second gap in the literature on aesthetic labor appears in its consideration for how customers shape aesthetic labor. While the extant work has rightfully illustrated that corporate branding shapes service interactions (i.e., through mandatory training on appropriate styling and demeanor) it has mostly neglected the question of how *customers* shape aesthetic labor at the interactional level. We know that customers do care about workers’ appearance. For example, Lan (2003), who used the term “bodily labor” to analyze the experiences of cosmetic saleswomen, noted that, “workers’ bodies are not only subjected to the supervision of managers but are also under the surveillance gaze of customers,” (p. 21). Yet, most accounts of aesthetic labor focus primarily on the influence of branding and managerial surveillance over service

interactions. Typical of this approach is Pettinger's (2004) discussion of the relationship between "Service Cultures and Store Brands," (p. 175); while recognizing that service may be "personalized, based on the interaction between worker and customer," (p. 174) Pettinger prioritized the role of branding by focusing on how micro service interactions are influenced by "[t]he brand orientation, specifically which customer segment of the mass market a store is aiming at," (p. 175-176). In describing the "customer segment [...] a store is aiming at," Pettinger referred not to *actual* customers, but to an imagined *ideal* customer who mirrored brand ideologies. This focus may reflect an assumed convergence between brand ideology and customers' own values and aspirations. Yet customers may vary greatly in their desire to embrace brand aesthetics, particularly if branding counters mainstream ideals. How do "real" customers shape aesthetic labor at the interactional level?

Research on emotional labor provides some predictive clues. Customers' bring "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1983) to service encounters and workers respond to these in light of their own "feeling rules" (see Kang 2003; Williams 2006). "Feeling rules" are the emotional norms appropriate to a given situation or context, whether that context is a workplace or otherwise. As Hochschild explains, feeling rules "guide emotion work by establishing a sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges" (p. 56). Yet, emotion norms are not only shaped by the time and place of an interaction, but also the unique life experiences each person brings to the interaction. Thus, feeling rules also emerge out of one's gender, race/ethnicity, and class status. In her study of Korean manicurists serving racially diverse customers, Kang (2003) found that, while white customers wanted workers to induce positive feelings about their bodies, black customers instead expected workers to communicate "a sense of respect and fairness," (2003). Williams' (2006) ethnography of toy stores further illustrates that customers' *and* workers'

gender, race/ethnicity, and class combine to shape emotional labor, such that black workers resisted acting overly caring to white customers because they felt that “adopting an attitude of servility would reinforce racism among shoppers,” (p. 121). Just as gender, race/ethnicity, and class shape service interactions, it is reasonable to expect that aesthetic characteristics – and the feeling rules that emerge from these characteristics – will as well. But how, and with what consequences for those workers who do not fit aesthetic expectations?

Body Size as Aesthetic Labor and the “Feeling Rules” of “Fat Talk”

Contemporary mainstream American society holds strong aesthetic preferences for slenderness, and contempt for larger bodies (Bordo 2004, Popenoe 2005, Stearns 1997). Fat individuals may be considered personally responsible for their weight, lazy, lacking in self-control, and incompetent (Kristen 2002, Larkin and Pines 1979, Puhl and Brownell 2003), and are subjected to frequent discrimination and stigma. Fat stigma is highly gendered in that women experience intense pressures to conform to an increasingly thin ideal, while men are not held to the same stringent standards in terms of weight (Bordo 2004, Stearns 1997: 72). Body image is further mediated by racial identity such that black and Latina women tend to feel more positively about their bodies at higher weights than do white women (Grabe and Hyde 2006, Hesse-Biber et al. 2004, Molloy and Herzberger 1998). However, many women of color report feeling pressured to have “curves in the right places” (Grabe and Hyde 2006, Martin 2007, Mendible 2007, Molinary 2007), and even curve-embracing ethnic communities have upper limits of acceptable size for female bodies (see Nichter 2000 p. 176).

Unsurprisingly, larger women face workplace discrimination. Register and Williams (1990) found that young women (but not men) who were 20% or more over their standard weight

for height earned 12% less than women with smaller body size. Similarly, Pagan and Davila (1997) found that clinically “overweight” women, earned less than “normal-weight” women, but that “overweight” men did not earn less than “normal-weight” men. Size discrimination may be particularly salient in low-wage occupations involving interactive service work. Jasper and Klassen (1990) found that their sample of college students rated fatter salespeople more negatively than thinner salespeople, and that the negative effects of larger body size were stronger for female than male salespeople. In addition, fat persons working in face-to-face sales environments are often assigned to non-visible jobs (Bellizzi and Hasty 1998). These findings suggest that workers’ body size is an important trait to consider when examining aesthetic labor.

In Hochschild’s (1983) classic study of emotional labor, flight attendants’ bodies were regulated through grooming guidelines, mandatory girdles, and pre-flight public weigh-ins; “People may in fact be fired for being one pound overweight,” (102). Similarly, Pettinger (2004) described saleswomen in upscale retail stores as follows: “Workers at such stores are not only fashionably dressed, they are young, *usually slim*, with ‘attractive’ faces,” (2010, p. 178, emphasis added). While much research finds that women workers are expected to maintain slim figures, little work has explicitly examined the experiences of fat workers (indeed, in most of these workplaces fat women would not have been hired, and slim women could be fired for gaining even a small amount of weight). Even Czerniawski’s (2011) analysis of the aesthetic labor performed by plus-size fashion models admits that, because models are considered plus-size once they reach Size 8, “most casual observers of plus-size models would not perceive them as ‘plus-size’ or even fat,” (p. 2). Considering that obese women are less likely to go to college than their thinner counterparts (Crosnoe and Muller 2004) and that minimum-wage earners are

more likely to be obese than those who earn higher wages (DaeHwan and Leigh 2010), this lack of research documenting the experiences of women workers who are *actually* fat begs remedy.

Research on “fat talk” (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994, Nichter 2000) further illustrates that there are “feeling rules” tied to women’s body size. Although “fat activists” reclaim the word “fat” with pride, much as gay rights activists reclaimed the label “queer” (Cooper 1998, Saguy and Riley 2005, Saguy and Ward 2010), the word “fat” almost always takes pejorative connotations in popular discourse. The term “fat talk” specifically refers to a gendered discourse pattern in which a woman complains about her body to another woman (i.e., “I’m so fat!”) to evoke a supportive response (i.e., “No, you’re not!”). Psychologist Lauren Britton and associates (2006) have theorized fat talk as a virtually universal and mundane “Social Norm for Women to Self-Degrade” their bodies (p. 247), at least in the contemporary American context (Britton et al. 2006, Craig, Martz and Bazzini 2006). Given gendered expectations that women should be both slender and self-effacing, fat talk might be understood as one way that women – at least white women – hold each other accountable for “doing gender,” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet, sub-cultural differences in body ideals suggest that black and Latina women may have different “feeling rules” for discourse around body size and shape. How might these different feeling rules shape aesthetic labor?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To address my research questions I conducted 10 months of participant observation as a paid sales associate at Real Style, a women’s plus-size store in Los Angeles, California. Previous work has argued that plus-size clothing companies’ “flesh-normalizing” campaigns offer a “species of resistance” against oppressive mainstream body ideals (Bordo 2004: p. xxxi). Saguy

and Ward (2010), for example, describe plus-size fashion as “the industry most invested in creating positive and glamorous images of larger female bodies.” Real Style was an ideal site for observing how brand ideology, body size, and feeling rules combined to shape service interactions because offered the distinctive vantage point of observing the experiences of (mostly) plus-sized women workers and customers interacting within the framework of corporate branding that proudly emphasized the concept of “Real Women.”

Working as a paid sales associate at Real Style allowed me to spend considerable time observing both the “front stage” of the shop floor, as well as the “back stage” break room and stockroom (Goffman 1959). I spent the majority of my time assisting customers, working to keep the store tidy, setting up new store displays during after-hours “floor sets”, and passing the slower times by chatting with my coworkers. When interacting with customers, my tasks ranged from providing very basic help, such as retrieving an article of clothing from the stockroom, to more complex interactions, such as measuring women for bras or providing advice on clothing choices. I also spent time with several of my coworkers outside of Real Style in a variety of contexts including carpooling, sharing meals at the corner diner, and attending a movie, a baby shower, and a coworker’s funeral. I was open with coworkers about my status as a graduate student, and that I was conducting research on body image and the fashion industry.

I recorded field notes during my breaks at Real Style using a personal digital assistant and portable keyboard. When I could do so discretely I scribbled a short “reminder” phrase or two on receipt paper while working. I dictated additional field-notes into a digital recorder during my commute home, and then transcribed and elaborated upon these notes with remaining details in the evening or on the following day. Field notes were analyzed inductively using

analytic memos to organize prominent themes and narratives as they emerged. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

As a participant in the everyday life at Real Style I frequently found myself immersed within the data I was collecting. Because I have chosen to draw upon several of my own experiences for this article, it seems pertinent to describe my social location at the site. Compared to most Real Style shoppers and employees, I was of similar height to many (5'5"), but was smaller in girth to almost all, generally wearing a standard-sized "10" in pants; I belong to the class that Ellsworth (1994: p. 309) refers to as having "white-skin, middle-class, able-bodied, and thin privilege." I anticipated that my being a standard-sized employee might naturally disrupt some of the unspoken assumptions that women held about working or shopping at a "plus-size" store. In this sense, my mere presence at Real Style resembled Garfinkel's (1967) use of breaching experiments to tease out the unwritten rules of social interaction. Because body size was of such great salience at Real Style, I have especially had to consider how "thin privilege," – and my own (white, middle-class) assumptions about body size – shaped my role as researcher and, sometimes, subject.

A Note on Terms: Defining Body Size Contextually

Body size is both objective, in that it can be measured and defined, and also subjective, in that understandings of what constitutes "normal," or "desirable" are based on context. The U.S. fashion industry has standards – albeit inconsistent standards – defining body size. At the time of this writing, in most American women's clothing stores, sizes run in even numbers starting with "0" up to size "12". These are considered "standard" sizes. Sizes between "14" and "28" are generally considered "plus-size," and are predominantly sold by specialty "plus-size" retailers.

Women who are larger than size “28” must buy clothes from other sources, such as online retailers. As illustrated in Table 1, women’s clothing sizes are determined by measuring the body’s circumference in inches at bust, waist, and hip; a “perfect” size “14” woman at Real Style has the bust/waist/hip measurements of 40”/34”/42” and a “perfect” size “28” woman measures at 54”/48”/56”, respectively. Due to variation in body proportions, few women match size measurements exactly, and many wear one size in tops and another in bottoms.

Interestingly, size 14 may actually be *average* for American women (SizeUsa 2004), a finding that highlights the extent to which the term “plus-size” should be contextualized within the ultra-slender ideals of mainstream culture, including those found in the fashion industry (recall, fashion models are considered “plus size” starting at size 8!). As shown in Table 2, estimated clothing sizes for average white, black, and Latina women in America (aged 18-65) range from approximately size 10 to size 18. In this sense, the term “plus-size” is quite comparable to the medical term “overweight” in that both of these terms place the *majority* of women in the “plus” or “over” category. Indeed, there is considerable overlap between women who are clinically “overweight” and who also wear “plus-size” clothes. However, because medical standards for body size are calculated using weight and height, while clothing standards use bust/waist/hip circumference, these concepts are associated but not always co-existing.

Because data for this project were collected in a women’s clothing store, I draw upon the guidelines set by the fashion industry, referring to subjects’ as either “plus-sized” (size 14 or higher) or “standard-sized” (below size 14). For the remainder of this article, other terms describing body size are used only when quoting from subjects who employ these terms.

FINDINGS

Below, I present my findings on how corporate branding and customers' diverse "feeling rules" interacted to shape service interactions at Real Style, and whether Real Style's brand ideology created opportunities for plus-sized women to resist stigma and discrimination. I argue that, despite branding that promoted prideful appreciation for "Real" female bodies, these body-accepting messages were constrained by customers' internalized fat stigma, resulting in an environment characterized by ambivalence toward larger body size. This ambivalence allowed hierarchies between women to be reified, rather than dissolved. After describing both the brand ideology and the fat-ambivalent climate of Real Style, I present my findings on (1) how demands for aesthetic and emotional labor, along with the physical organization of the store itself, shaped hiring and promotion practices, leading to gender segregation and the privileging of thinner workers and managers, and (2) how body-disparaging "fat talk" (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994, Nichter 2000) was used by managers and white – but not black or Latina – customers to elicit workers' emotional labor and to communicate resistance to standard-sized workers who defied aesthetic expectations.

Ambivalence about Body Size: Real Pride vs. Plus-Sized Shame

In my first impressions of Real Style it appeared to be an oasis of body-acceptance for plus-sized women. Mannequins in the storefront were larger and more curvaceous than typical mannequins, and the branded concept of "Real Women" appeared throughout store and company literature, from discount coupons called "Real Women Dollar\$," to profiles of the "Real Women of Real Style" (always wearing the latest Real Style fashions) featured on the store website. From the store website, I also learned that,

The Real Style look is fashionable, fresh and sophisticated. From chic, comfortable casual wear to fashion-forward wear-to-work outfits, Real Style is all about helping women with curves feel feminine, confident and proud in every situation.

Complimenting this emphasis on “Real Women” and “women with curves” in store branding materials and the store website, Real Style’s corporate website asserted that “Real Style customers shop for style, not just for size,” and that the company’s “emphasis on fashion – *not* size – makes us the premier destination in its category,” (emphasis added). These branding and corporate materials suggested that women ought to be “confident” and “proud” of being “real” and having “curves”. Terms like “sophisticated,” “chic,” “fashion-forward” and “feminine” further painted a picture in which the ideal Real Style “look” was presumably middle- to upper-class and certainly gender-conforming.

The clothing offered by Real Style ranged in size from 14 to 28, with three additional sizes (12, 30, and 32) offered online for certain items. Most Real Style garments were designed to fit women of an approximate height of 5’6” with additional “petite” sizes for women 5’4” or shorter, and “tall” sizes for women 5’8” or taller. The Real Style corporate website identified its target customer as “plus-size women ages 35-55.” No corporate materials spoke to the race/ethnicity or class status of target customers, though in-store, print, and television advertisements typically featured both white women and women of color, often side-by-side. Customers, who frequented the store from a myriad of Los Angeles neighborhoods, were almost all plus-sized women, ranged in age from teenagers to seniors, and were racially diverse. A small minority of standard-sized women shopped at Real Style only to purchase bras, and one regular customer was a cross-dressing man.

As shown in Table 3, 23 of 34 employees at Real Style were plus-sized women, along with 7 standard-sized female employees, and 4 standard-sized male employees. Employees were

also ethnically diverse; of the plus-sized women working at Real Style, 12 were black, 6 were Latina, 4 were white, and 1 identified as multi-racial. Of the standard-sized female employees, 2 were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 were black, 1 was Latina, 1 was white, and 1 identified as Israeli. Of the four male employees, 2 were black, 1 was Latino, and 1 was white. No male employees were plus-sized.

As a site in which “real” female bodies “with curves” were emphasized with pride, rather than stigmatized, I was not surprised to learn that Real Style represented for many customers and employees the possibility of feeling and being treated as normal. Yet this informal designation of Real Style as a body-positive place for “Real Women” was tenuous, as plus-sized customers and employees seemed constantly wary of anticipated experiences of fat stigma from the *real world*. This contrast between corporate branding and women’s lived experiences created an environment that was ultimately ambivalent toward larger body size; customers and workers vacillated between gratitude for Real Style’s very existence, and self-disdain for “having” to work or shop there.

Several customers and employees explicitly expressed gratitude regarding their experiences of shopping or working at Real Style. Kim, a multi-racial plus-sized employee in her mid-thirties told me that working at Real Style “[didn’t] even feel like work,” because it was the only place where she could “relax and be [her]self.” Similarly, Joe, a store manager who was in the process of leaving Real Style to work at a different store, commented that he would miss Real Style because he felt that the employees were “more loyal here – less likely to just randomly call in sick an’ stuff.” When I asked Joe why he thought this to be the case, he said, “the women here think of this as their home – it’s a place of comfort to them, where they come to socialize. Not everybody here is like that, but there’s a lot of loyalty.”

One white, middle-aged customer expressed a similar sense of gratitude when she admitted to me that Real Style was the only store in which she felt comfortable enough to leave her private fitting room to look at herself in the semi-public store mirrors. Another customer, also white and middle-aged, mentioned that it was a “relief” to know that clothes were always available in her size at Real Style, which made her feel “normal.” Yet, this sense of security and gratitude toward Real Style, combined with plus-sized women’s disadvantaged position in society, introduced the potential for both workers and customers to be manipulated by corporate policies, even as marketing put them at ease. Christine, one of the store managers (who was a standard-sized black woman) mentioned to me that Real Style was “lucky these women can’t shop anywhere else. We just name the price and they have to buy it!” Christine’s comment is a stark contrast to the corporate website’s assertion that customers “shop for style, not just for size,” suggesting that this claim may be merely idealistic. In truth, compared to standard-sized women, plus-sized women customers did not have many clothing stores to choose from (indeed, none of the other 27 “women’s apparel” stores at the mall specialized in plus-sized clothing). Similarly, if employees felt that their body size would cause them to be stigmatized in other workplaces, they may have been more willing to accept exploitative conditions (i.e., low pay, poor hours, inadequate breaks) at Real Style, their “place of comfort.”

Customers often expressed explicit frustration, sadness, and disappointment about “needing” to shop at Real Style. Once, as I was ringing up a white customer in her late twenties and engaging in some small talk, the customer thanked me for my help, but then looked at her shopping bag and exclaimed, “Oh, I remember when Real Style didn’t print their logo on the bags. Now I always have to remember to turn the bag around so nobody knows where I have to shop!” Unsure of how to respond, I remarked that a lot of people might not even know that Real

Style was a store for bigger sizes. In response, she said, “Yeah, but *I* know, and I’ll always feel disappointed in myself for not losing the weight.” This customer’s comment communicates her own sense of shame and embarrassment for “having” to shop at Real Style, while also driving home the extent to which certain boundaries had been placed around the store itself; despite thanking me for her shopping experience while *at* Real Style, this customer planned to hide her shopping bag once she left the store, perhaps in hopes that she might more easily “pass” as just another (standard-sized) shopper at the mall. Goffman (1963: 83) points out that stigmatized individuals who attempt to pass as “normals” in their daily lives often encounter “unanticipated needs to disclose discrediting information” (p. 83). To the extent that some customers may have hoped to “pass” as *not* being plus-sized, the activity of shopping in Real Style represented a shameful public marker of being somehow “officially” fat.

Susan Bordo (2004) noted that plus-size stores’ “campaigns proudly show off unclothed zaftig bodies and, unlike older marketing to ‘plus-size’ women, refuse to use that term, insisting (accurately) that what has been called ‘plus-size’ is in fact average,” (p. xxxi). Indeed, as described above, Real Style’s in-store, television, and catalogue marketing campaigns rarely used the term “plus-size” but instead emphasized the concept of “Real Women,” which proudly insinuated that plus-sized women were somehow more *real* than standard-sized women. Yet, customers typically referred to themselves as “big,” “full-figured,” “curvy,” “thick,” or “chubby,” rather than as “real” or even “plus-sized.” While the alternative descriptors listed above are less culturally stigmatizing than the word “fat” (which customers used frequently, but only when *bemoaning* their body size), these terms certainly do not pridefully re-claim identity in the way that “Real” attempted to do in corporate marketing, or as the word “fat” has been

reclaimed by fat activists. This finding, in particular, highlights the limited extent to which corporate branding was able to supersede deeply entrenched cultural values.

Mechanisms of Size and Gender Segregation at Real Style

Hiring practices and task assignments at Real Style revealed that both gender and body size strongly shaped the store's organization of labor. In particular, top-level managers and stock-room workers were *all* standard-sized, and were more likely to be men, while all assistant managers and sales associates were women and were predominantly plus-sized. At first glance, these patterns suggested the influence of a "glass escalator" mechanism (Williams 1992), propelling men and standard-sized workers to the top of workplace hierarchies. Indeed, standard-sized sales associates were often assigned "special" tasks and were given more *opportunities* for advancement. Yet, these opportunities were rarely fulfilled, as few workers desired assistant-manager positions and turnover was high. Instead, the relative thinness of upper management seemed best explained by this high turnover rate and Real Style's resulting practice of filling store manager positions by recruiting managers from other clothing stores, where plus-sized employees were rare. Thus, Real Style's size segregation did not fit Williams' classic "glass escalator" model. I nevertheless argue that the gender and size segregation of lower-level workers (stock associates and sales associates) was shaped by managers' sexist and sizist assumptions about workers' abilities to provide satisfactory aesthetic and emotional labor, as well as assumptions about workers' physical abilities. Further, the physical organization of the shop floor, itself, privileged thinner workers.

As seen in Table 3, while five out of six assistant managers, and eighteen out of twenty sales associates were plus-sized, *none* of the top-tier managers or stock associates at Real Style

were plus-sized. Also, all of the men employed at Real Style (none whom were plus-sized) worked either as top-level managers or as stock associates. Top-tier managers included store managers (one Latino man, one black woman), the district manager (an Asian woman), and the regional director (a white man). Stock associates, all standard-sized, included two black men and one Filipina woman. Among sales associates, all whom were women, only three were standard-sized. Assistant managers were all women and predominantly plus-sized.

Of the two standard-sized sales associates, one, an Israeli immigrant named Nessa, had previously been plus-sized but had lost weight after having bariatric surgery. The other standard-sized sales associate, a black woman, worked only during monthly “floor-sets” and during the winter holiday season when business was particularly busy. The only standard-sized assistant manager, a Latina woman, had been recruited externally and hired as a “packaged deal” along with one of the store managers. While the size distribution of the store (with plus-sized workers hired for the most visible and customer-oriented jobs) is a stark contrast to prior ethnographic work on retail workplaces, the gendered concentration of men into leadership and stock-room positions is *not* unique (see, for example, Williams 2006). Compared to the segregation across size and gender, the racial/ethnic composition of employees was actually quite dispersed both horizontally and vertically. I will return to this finding in the conclusion.

Assistant managers were typically promoted from within the sales associates currently working at the store, but I never saw this lead to additional promotions above this level. Rather, the assistant manager jobs were associated with extremely high turnover, as these positions demanded more responsibility and longer hours, but offered no benefits and only a small pay increase. Additionally, because many sales associates depended on income from two part-time jobs, and because assistant managers were expected to work hours approaching – but never

actually *reaching* – full-time work (which would have included benefits), accepting a promotion to assistant manager made for an exceedingly slippery stepping-stone to full-time work as a store manager. Indeed, several sales associates had worked at the store for longer than two years without even seeking a promotion. As Kiesha, a black plus-sized sales associate, explained to me when I asked her why she didn't want to be an assistant manager, “they know not to even *ask* me. I[’ve] got to keep my assisted-living job and I don’t want to deal with managing people.” The high turnover of assistant managers also helps explain why store managers were recruited from outside of the store; assistant managers generally quit before they could be promoted.

Real Style’s explicit commitment to “helping women with curves feel feminine, confident and proud” helps explain why plus-sized women were preferred over standard-sized women for sales jobs. Yet, this preference seemed to have less to do with a need for workers to model store fashions, and more to do with presumptions for how a woman’s body size predicted her ability to get along with customers. Specifically, preferences for plus-sized women as sales associates seemed to reflect assumptions about their ability to more sensitively attend to plus-sized customers’ body insecurities. For example, during my employment interviews, I was quizzed about my ability to serve customers without alienating them. In my first interview, Daphne, a plus-sized black assistant manager, tried to subtly bring up this concern by asking me, “Do *you* shop at Real Style?”

I wondered if she was trying to find a polite way to bring up the fact that I was not plus-sized. I told her that I wore Size 10 and had never shopped at Real Style. She explained that the only reason she was bringing this up was because employees who are also plus-sized sometimes had a better understanding of their customers and have easier interactions.

Later, when I interviewed with the district manager (a standard-sized Asian woman), I was more pointedly asked, “What will you tell a customer who asks you ‘Why are *you* working here? You

aren't plus-sized!" After responding as best as I could, I was told, "Well, it will definitely come up at some point, so it's good for you to think about it now." These open concerns about the ability of standard-sized women to attend to plus-sized customers points the important relationship between workers' aesthetic appearance and their presumed ability to adequately perform *emotional* labor.

A similar fear of alienating female customers kept male employees away from the sales floor, though men were considered inappropriate due to their gender, rather than their size. During a corporate-mandated training meeting lead by Joe (the store manager), sales associates were required to practice performing bra-fits on each other. Conducting a bra-fit involved measuring the circumference of a women's body at the fullest point of her bust, and again around her torso, just under the bust-line. After several sales associates couldn't complete the task without giggling, Joe seemed to become frustrated by their immaturity. To make an example, he asked Mark, one of the stockroom workers to "show them how it's really done!" Mark – an unfailingly proper man – proceeded to demonstrate an impeccable bra fit on a sales associate, carefully avoiding touching the sales associate's body by asking her to hold one end of the measuring tape at the side of her torso. The sales associate helped as requested, but at the completion of the fit, stuck out her chest and jokingly wiggled it at Mark, breasts bouncing. This caused several of the women sales associates to break into laughter again. They further embarrassed Mark by suggestively cupping their breasts and asking him to measure *them*. After convincing the women to calm down, Joe jokingly exclaimed "and *that's* why we keep guys in the back!"

Of course, being plus-sized was not the only requirement for being hired to work on the sales floor; sales associates were also expected to "look good and sound right" on the job, which

meant embodying the Real Style brand image. The ideal interactive service worker at Real Style was not only plus-sized women, but was also “chic,” “sophisticated,” and “feminine” in her dress and mannerisms. I saw these stylistic standards prompt store managers to filter out a few plus-sized job applicants on the spot, including one woman who – according to Joe – “wasn’t even wearing a bra!” Another time Christine, who took pride in being a “respectable” black woman, refused to hire a plus-sized black woman who “sounded ghetto and smelled like McDonald’s.” These examples illustrate that managers desired workers whose aesthetic attributes had been cultivated prior to hire. Indeed, sales associates were often recruited from within Real Style’s (plus-sized) customer base, echoing Williams’ and Connell’s (2010) finding that companies often do so to build a workforce that seamlessly replicates the aesthetic tastes and mannerisms of discerning customers (at least those who have the “right look”).

Once hired, sales associates were given specific instructions for their dress. Although we were not required to wear clothing from Real Style during our shifts, our “style” needed to be “consistent with current merchandise,” and we were not allowed to wear jeans or flip-flops (deemed “too casual”), even though these items were sold in the store. I witnessed store managers chastising sales associates who “acted ghetto” by speaking in urban slang, or who “looked like white trash” for wearing flip-flops to work or having unkempt nails. However, these reprimands were only loosely enforced; I never witnessed a worker being sent home, much less fired, due to dress code violations, and even the store managers frequently shifted into more casual language and/or urban slang, particularly when assisting customers who spoke in these ways.

Standard-sized sales associates were more likely than plus-sized sales associates to be assigned special tasks, such as dressing mannequins or “running” to get coffee or snacks for

managers. The first of these tasks, dressing mannequins, was delegated to standard-sized employees for “practical” reasons; the window bays used to display mannequins were extremely narrow, and only standard-sized employees could actually fit into the space. Because dressing mannequins was one of the few tasks in which sales associates were able to display independent decision-making, self-supervision, and creativity, these assignments increased standard-sized employees’ level of responsibility and rapport with managers. Standard-sized sales associates were also more often asked to “run” errands for managers, presumably because plus-sized employees were thought to be less able to perform these tasks efficiently. By sending standard-sized employees on unsupervised coffee runs, these workers were more often provided breaks from the monotony of sales-floor work (indeed, I tended to “run” these errands at an exceedingly *slow* pace!), while simultaneously performing tasks that were appreciated by management. Plus-sized sales associates requested these tasks but were denied.

Echoing the hiring patterns of sales associates, stockroom workers seemed to be hired based on assumptions that men and standard-sized women would be more capable of physical labor, would be less likely to steal inventory during unsupervised work, and – as described above – that they would make customers feel uncomfortable if assigned to more interactive service work. Further, as with dressing mannequins, the narrow physical space of the stockroom made it difficult for the largest plus-sized workers to shelve clothes. While taking my break in the store’s back room, I struck up a conversation with Marisol, the standard-sized Filipina woman who worked in the stockroom. I asked her why she decided to work at Real Style. She explained that she worked at another store in the mall, but needed more hours. She wanted her second job to be at the mall because she didn’t own a car, and didn’t want to have an extra bus commute. A coworker at her other job worked at Real Style. “One of the other ladies at the candy store works

here [at Real Style] and told me she got regular hours, so she could work both places on the same days. So I applied and got hired.” When I asked Marisol why she’d decided to work in the stockroom I learned that she had actually applied for a sales associate position, but that Joe asked her if she could work “in the back” because he “needed people who were light on their feet.”

This logic surprised me, as working on the sales floor involved constant activity and had its own share of heavy lifting. When I asked Marisol if she thought the job really needed somebody “light on their feet,” she replied:

Well, there are definitely some big boxes but it’s mostly just about staying organized... (she paused before continuing) ...but I don’t think the biggest girls could fit between the stock shelves too easily. I usually have to get stuff for the other girls, but I don’t mind - this way nobody can mess up my shelves.

Marisol’s story suggests that both narrower body size and presumed “lightness on feet” may have motivated Joe to hire standard-sized women and men as stockroom workers. A few weeks after this conversation, Marisol was reportedly caught stealing from the store inventory and promptly fired. Commenting on the situation, Christine exclaimed, “I was so surprised, I mean, we figured *she* wouldn’t be interested in the clothes back there!” During the weeks before finding Marisol’s replacement (a standard-sized black man), Nessa – one of the standard-size sales associates – was asked to take over some of the stock-room responsibilities. Christine’s comment suggests that another reason managers hire standard-sized women and men to work in the stockroom is to minimize internal theft. Because stock associates work largely unsupervised, managers may feel more comfortable hiring workers who cannot wear the merchandise and would, therefore, be less motivated to steal it.

Fat Talk” as Emotional Labor: Feeling Rules and Aesthetics

Real Style customers’ and managers’ frequent conversations about dieting, and requests for body image reassurances became “emotional labor” in that sales associates were compelled to respond supportively any time “fat talk” was initiated by either of these groups. Expectations for “fat talk” reassurances were so pervasive that the phrase “Does this outfit make me look FAT?!” was an inside joke between sales associates, who seemed to find it both ridiculous and annoying that plus-sized (i.e., fat by definition) customers wanted reassurance that they were not, actually, fat. For example, one day while I was folding t-shirts with Luz, a plus-sized Latina sales associate, I overheard a white customer in her early twenties ask Luz whether the jeans she had tried on made her “butt look big.” Rolling her eyes at me before turning to the customer, Luz replied by calling out, “Oh honey, don’t worry about that. Those jeans made your butt look cute!” and then, quietly enough so that only I could hear, she whispered, “... and big.” As has been observed in other ethnographies examining emotional labor (Sanders 2004) the use of this type of humor and sarcasm between workers seemed to help redirect and reframe negative emotions while also reaffirming workers’ camaraderie.

Fat talk and conversations about dieting seemed particularly degrading and frustrating when customers or managers assumed that plus-sized employees wanted to lose weight. One example of this arose when I noticed that there was a scale in the employee restroom. Curious as to why it was there, and who was using it, I asked Andrea, one of the assistant managers, to explain, “who brought in the scale?” Andrea laughed and said, “Oh... well that was for this weight-loss contest we had last winter. We all divided up into teams with Daphne (assistant manager) and Joe (store manager) as the leaders, and the team that lost the most weight won a pizza party.” Recalling Hochschild’s (1983) observations of flight attendants’ public weight-ins,

I asked her if everybody had to get on the scale in front of each other. She reassured me that, “Only the team leaders got to know the weights.” When I remarked that being weighed in front of my boss didn’t sound like fun, Andrea chuckled and exclaimed, “Well *I* thought it was fun.”

This weight-loss contest illustrates the pressures placed upon workers to echo managers’ attitudes, while further demonstrating Real Style’s ambivalence toward larger body size. On the one hand, many employees clearly wanted to lose weight (or at the very least enjoyed participating in the collective event), as seen in Andrea’s description of the contest as “fun” and in Nessa’s prior decision to undergo bariatric surgery. On the other hand, because store managers supervised it, the contest seemed to imply that plus-sized employees *should* be monitoring their weight – an approach seemingly in conflict with the concept of Real Women. Yet, by rewarding the winning team with a pizza party (which, I learned, was actually shared by everyone), the management team seemed to ultimately tell workers, “Actually, we don’t care whether or not you lose weight, as long as you’re willing to play along with the situation at hand. Eat up!”

Learning to behave flexibly in their attitudes toward larger body size was an important skill for workers to have when it came to interacting with diverse clientele. For example, a white, middle-aged customer came into the store one day, announcing that she had just lost twenty pounds and was going to “spend a lot of money” to replace her “entire wardrobe”. Over the next two hours, Kim, a plus-sized sales associate, spent every minute closely assisting this customer, fetching clothes and accepting unsolicited diet advice, while attentively and animatedly responding to her concern that the weight loss “didn’t show.” At the end of this extended interaction, the customer happily left the store with several hundred dollars worth of clothes, Real Style benefited from the large sale, but Kim seemed simply drained by both the emotional and physical labor involved. Although the extended time involved in this interaction made it

unique from most service encounters, Kim's supportive reaction to her customers' fat talk was typical. Later that afternoon Kim, who had worked through her 15-minute break to assist this customer, was chastised by one of the managers for resting on a bench that was "just for customers" while folding clothes in the fitting rooms.

Over time I noticed that white customers were much more likely than black or Latina customers to initiate stereotypical fat talk with employees, a pattern that reflects both Kang's (2003) and Williams' (2006) findings about the different feeling rules at play in racially diverse service work environments. Black and Latina customers were also much less likely than white customers to express shame for "having" to shop at Real Style. In fact, on two different occasions, standard-sized Black women entered the store and expressed frustration that they weren't *big* enough to fit into the clothes. These instances suggest that shopping at Real Style was not seen as stigmatizing for these women, a likely effect of differing cultural ideas about ideal body size and shape.

If they engaged in negative body talk at all, black and Latina customers tended to express dismay about not having the "right" body shape (hourglass seemed to be the ideal), sometimes remarking that their breasts or bottoms were too small or flat. In one case, a Latina customer was having trouble finding a pair of jeans with a good fit, when Gia, a plus-sized Latina sales associate, gently suggested that the customer try a pair of jeans designed for women "with more of an apple shape." The customer sighed loudly and said, "yeah that would help. I've got this stomach, but no *culo* [bottom] to balance it!" In response, Gia promised the customer that the suggested pants would help make her look more "curvy." On another occasion a middle-aged black customer told Krystal, a white plus-sized sales associate, that she could not wear shorts or short skirts because her legs were "too skinny". Krystal seemed surprised, but, after a slight

pause, assured the customer that her legs were lovely and that she should wear whatever she wanted. As this second example illustrates, customers' feeling rules direct these interactions; even if surprised, workers responded sensitively, regardless of their own cultural understandings of body size and shape.

Customers' understanding of Real Style as a "place of comfort" for plus-sized women, combined with their "the customer is always right" authority over all store employees, allowed them to voice dismay toward workers who failed to meet expectations for aesthetic or emotional labor. For example, one day I was scheduled to work with Christine, the store manager and Silvia, an assistant manager, both who – like me – were standard-sized. While working at the register, I overheard Silvia speaking with an elderly white customer, who asked if she could "speak with the manager." Silvia explained that she *was* a manager, and asked if she could help the woman with something.

The woman said, "Well, that's just it... you might not understand. I haven't been in here for a while, so maybe something changed, but isn't this supposed to be a store for big ladies? All of the girls working here are small. Didn't they used to be bigger?" In response, Silvia said, "Well I just started so I don't know how it used to be, but we still have a lot of bigger girls working here, they just didn't get assigned to this shift." The woman looked upset, and asked "but isn't this a store for bigger girls?" Silvia reassured the woman that the clothes were still "plus-size," but the customer left the store without looking at anything, saying, "I'll come back another day, but I hope it's back to normal by then."

To this customer, the mismatch between Real Style's brand identity and employees' bodies challenged her expectations to the extent that she left the store. Instances like this were rare, but nonetheless offered opportunities for plus-sized women to use their power as consumers to communicate to managers that standard-sized workers might be bad for business.

Customers varied in their responses to being confronted in a space that was supposed to be "safe," with reminders of social preferences for thinner bodies. As predicted by my hiring

managers, customers frequently asked me, “Why are *you* working here?” The tone of this question tended to be jovial, but a few times felt more accusatory. Often, customers’ reactions to standard-sized employees took the form of verbal disciplining within fat talk interactions, a phenomenon I term “talking out of size.” In these cases, shared understandings of how fat talk *should* be performed provided customers with the opportunity to break the rules (or signal to me that I was breaking them) to communicate their displeasure or frustration.

For example, when I was assisting a middle-aged white woman in the fitting room she lamented that she couldn’t wear short sleeves because of her “fatty arms.” In response I began to tell her that I thought she would look just fine in short sleeves, but she interrupted before I could finish, saying, “.... oh, what would *you* know? You’ve got *twigs* for arms!” This interaction initially followed a typical pattern for fat talk in that the customer began with a seeming request for body reassurances. However, she cut me off me before I could provide them. This interruption – permitted through her status as a customer – prevented me from “talking out of size,” as a thinner woman. These instances reveal that consumer environments *do* present opportunities for customers to evoke agentic resistance to situations they find stigmatizing, although this came at the expense of workers’ own abilities to respond in kind.

Another time, when describing the fit of a pair of jeans to a white customer in her early 30s, I jokingly said that the pants were “great for women like me, who always get a ‘muffin top!’” When the customer stared at me without responding, I naively continued by saying, “You know.... muffin top! When the waistband of your pants cuts into your waist and you kind of spill over them like the top of a muffin.” Without cracking a smile the customer responded curtly: “I don’t think *you* have any place to be complaining about muffin top.” Again, the Real Style environment offered plus-sized women customers (though not workers) rare opportunities for

safe subversion against cultural preferences for thinness. Through these interactions I learned more about the unspoken rules at Real Style, and also about some of the (upper-class, white, standard-sized) assumptions I'd had about my own body. For example, when I started my field work at Real Style I'd thought of my "size 10" body as being *obviously* closer to plus-sized than to "skinny." However, when challenged for "talking out of size" I quickly learned that being even one or two sizes smaller than "plus size" was very meaningful to customers, who often viewed me as "skinny" and therefore as a distinct "other."

Later that day a manager pulled me aside and suggested that I tell customers that I "used to be fat" to avoid these "uncomfortable situations." This advice may have been inspired by the experiences of another sales associate, Nessa, an Israeli immigrant in her mid-twenties who had previously been plus-sized, but, having undergone bariatric surgery, was strikingly tall and slender. Customers often accused Nessa of being "too skinny." In response, Nessa would say that she "used to be a size 26" but had gotten her "stomach stapled." If customers expressed doubt as to the truth of her story, Nessa would lift her shirt to proudly reveal extensive scarring on her waist and stomach, from the initial surgery and several "excess-skin removal" procedures. By doing this, Nessa signaled her ability to empathize with customers (and, thus, successfully provide emotional labor), despite her standard-sized body.

Without a similar story (and an unwillingness to lie) I developed alternative techniques to avoid customers' chastisement. For example, I learned to respond to customers' fat talk by suggesting different articles of clothing as solutions, rather than by providing untrusted reassurances or by presuming that my own body-size complaints were appropriate bridging techniques. Of course, this was an imperfect solution; although offering clothing to remedy a customer's body complaints allowed me to reframe the "problem" as residing in garments rather

than her body, by agreeing that there was a problem to be solved in the first place, I often found myself reinforcing mainstream beauty ideals. Sadly, the most effective way to prevent myself from “talking out of size” was by finding an area of my own body that was *believably* unsatisfactory. In my case, during bra-fits, I could respond to women’s complaints about their breasts by communicating disappointment with my own (relatively) smaller breasts. Because having large breasts was often a source of *pride* for many customers, this provided a means by which they could feel somewhat luckier than me. While I felt relieved to have learned another “trick” for smoothing fat talk interactions, it was disheartening to knowingly reproduce body-hating discourses. For better or worse, I decided that easing interactions away from conflict (and perhaps helping some customers feel “lucky” about their breasts) felt infinitely better – and more authentic – than refusing to empathize with fat talk out of principle.

Fat talk also appeared as emotional labor when *managers* initiated it with workers. These fat talk interactions had the potential to be especially demeaning, given that upper-level managers were almost universally thinner than their subordinates. Yet, in contrast to instances when a standard-sized sales associate “talked out of size” to a plus-sized customer, standard-sized managers who initiated fat talk to plus-sized workers were responded to with reassurance and flattery. In other words, managers’ privileged positions at the store allowed them to “talk out of size” without reprimand, at least to their subordinates. For example, while folding t-shirts I overheard the store manager, Joe, complaining to Kim about how he had gained seven pounds and was “getting fat”. He lamented at length about how difficult it was to get to the gym every day, and Kim responded by saying “I know what you mean, it’s so tough! But you can do it – you have to take care of yourself!” On another occasion, after I returned from a “coffee run,” Christine complained to one of the plus-sized assistant managers and me about the calories in her

drink, saying, “Oh, I really have to watch myself with these treats so I don’t gain weight.” She then turned more pointedly to me, and jokingly said, “You know what I mean!”

At no point did I see a worker initiate fat talk with a supervisor, and I only rarely observed workers initiate it with customers, always in cases where customers were “regulars” who had friendship-like relationships with workers. Customers’ and managers’ fat talk placed a disproportionate burden on subordinate workers to “feign” rather than “feel”; the emotional labor of fat talk became an enactment of deference, as well as an opportunity for customers to discipline workers who defied aesthetic expectations. These data point to the enmeshment of emotional and aesthetic labor, and also how different “feeling rules” shape both.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article examined how corporate branding interacts with customers’ diverse feeling rules to shape service interactions. More specifically it investigated how a (purportedly) body-accepting brand ideology impacted the experiences of plus-sized workers and customers, asking (1) how this unique commercial context shaped workplace inequality in terms of aesthetic and emotional labor, and (2) whether it offered plus-sized women opportunities for agentic resistance against fat stigma. I argue that, although corporate branding at Real Style promoted prideful appreciation for larger female bodies, these discourses were limited in power by customers’ internalized fat stigma, and, thus, did not create the “species of resistance” optimistically proposed by Bordo (2004). Instead, Real Style was characterized by deep ambivalence toward larger body size, a context allowing hierarchies between women to be reinforced, rather than challenged.

Because the primary corporate goal of Real Style was to profit financially by selling clothes, the concept of “Real Women” seemed to be perpetuated by management only inasmuch as it helped employees and customers feel “at home” and “normal” while spending time (and money) at Real Style. In this endeavor, it was clear that corporate branding came *second* to premise that “the customer is always right” – a finding that may have been uniquely visible at Real Style, given that this store’s marketing challenged mainstream ideologies. Rather than being *re-claimed* with pride, “fat” was instead *re-named* (i.e., “real,” “chubby,” or “thick”), an approach that may have temporarily distracted some shoppers from their poor body image but did not actively challenge the social systems perpetuating it. Further, while Real Style’s branded concept of “Real Women” offered a rare critique to the mainstream ultra-slim beauty ideal, it simultaneously reified hierarchies between plus-sized and standard-sized women by implying that the former were somehow more “real” than the latter.

Employees at Real Style were segregated into jobs and tasks according to gender and body size such that the majority of sales associates and assistant managers were plus-sized women, while top-tier managers and stockroom workers were standard-sized, and more likely to be men. Although plus-sized women were preferred for interactive service jobs, these jobs were associated with high turnover, preventing plus-sized workers as a group from advancing to top-tier managerial positions. In particular, assistant manager positions provided an exceedingly “slippery stepping-stone” to upper-level management, as these jobs demanded increased responsibility and availability to work almost full-time hours, while offering no benefits and only a slight pay increase from lower positions. Because turnover was high, top-level management positions were recruited externally, where candidates were unlikely to be plus-sized.

Despite managerial preferences for hiring plus-sized women workers to positions requiring interactive service work, sales associates were assigned to tasks according to their body size, such that standard-sized sales associates were disproportionately selected for desirable tasks. These included dressing mannequins (which, due to the physical design of the store, could *only* be performed by standard-sized workers) and “running” managers’ errands. Standard-sized women and men were assigned to work in the stockroom, seemingly due to managers’ presumptions about workers’ physical fitness, concerns about their ability to adequately perform emotional and aesthetic labor on the sales floor, and (incorrect) assumptions that members of these groups would not steal merchandise. The physically narrow design of the stockroom shelving meant that, again, the largest workers could not easily perform stockroom tasks. I do not argue that dressing mannequins, running errands, or stockroom work were tasks of uniquely high status at Real Style (although they did offer workers greater self-supervision and breaks from monotony). Rather, my findings simply illustrate that jobs will be assigned to different groups of people depending on the prevailing workplace culture and aesthetic. Further, these findings point to the importance of considering how preferences for slimmer bodies are not just matters of taste, but have been built into the *physical* structure of workplaces in ways that invisibly privilege certain bodies over others.

Micro-interactions between workers, managers, and customers provided additional insight into how mainstream fat stigma discursively reinforced power hierarchies between women, even in an environment that branded itself as challenging hegemonic beauty standards. White (though not black or Latina) customers and managers often complained about their body size to workers (who then comforted them), but workers almost never initiated “fat talk” to supervisors or customers. Black and Latina customers, on the other hand, rarely complained

about fatness, but sometimes expressed frustration about not having an “hourglass figure,” highlighting the different “feeling rules” at play in gendered discourses about body size and shape. When evoked, “fat talk” operated on the sales floor as a form of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), reinforcing workers’ deference to both customers and managers, while also reifying hegemonic beauty standards.

Because fat talk interactions followed well-understood scripts, plus-sized customers were able to deviate from these scripts to discipline standard-sized workers who defied expectations for aesthetic labor. Given the extent to which larger female customers are frequently discriminated against by sales associates in service interactions (King et al. 2006), these instances seemed almost a form of poetic justice. Yet, plus-sized customers’ opportunities for resistance against mainstream fat stigma came at workers’ expense. Further, that managers were almost uniformly thinner than the workers to whom they complained further reinforced the lower status of workers when managers could “talk out of size” without recourse. Ultimately, fat talk at Real Style reified hierarchies of inequality between women on the basis of their bodies and their statuses as customers, managers, or workers.

My findings certainly point to areas of potential improvement for consumer spaces that wish to challenge fat stigma. However, these data should not be interpreted as evidence that Real Style did not, or could not, provide opportunities for plus-sized women to feel good about their bodies, or that the site was uniformly oppressive or divisive. To the contrary, my observations and personal experiences suggest that, compared to most other retail spaces (particularly those that do not even *offer* women’s clothing above size 12, or that would not consider hiring a fat woman), the brand ideology and culture at Real Style offered a *more* inclusive and “safer space” for plus-sized women to work and shop.

My data suggest several avenues for further research. While prior work on aesthetic labor in retail environments has found that ideal workers are “middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white,” (Williams and Connell 2010:350), workers at Real Style were racially diverse, and race/ethnicity was not a meaningful predictor for hiring decisions or task assignments. Given that retail workers are often selected to represent ideal consumers, and are often recruited from within the customer base, it is possible that this was simply due to *customers’* racial diversity. That said, given prior research showing that people may be more accepting of women with larger bodies when those bodies are also black (i.e. Maranto and Stenoien 2000), an interactional effect may be at work; it is a tantalizing possibility that – among plus-sized women workers – women of color may actually be preferred over white women. Although my observations of Real Style suggest these possible explanations, it is difficult to say with certainty. A compelling avenue for further research on aesthetic labor would be to focus more closely on the question of *which* physical characteristics are most meaningful in different workplaces, and how multiple traits intersect in hiring decisions.

Additionally, viewing fat talk as a form of emotional labor reveals not only the extent to which fat talk (and women’s poor body image in general) has been commodified on the sales floor, but also suggests that status may be an important dimension at play in *all* fat talk interactions. Wolf (1991: p. 284) astutely noted that competition between women over appearance is one mechanism of patriarchal control, whereby “constant comparison, in which one woman’s worth fluctuates through the presences of another, divides and conquers,” (p. 284). This article continues in this tradition in its finding that, through the discursive rituals of “fat talk,” women interactively reinforce distinctions between each other on the basis of body size while reifying power hierarchies. These interactions not only reinforce inequality between

women on the basis of body size, but also reinforce gender inequality more broadly by contributing to a disproportionate emphasis on women's appearance as determining their social worth. Future work examining how power is subtly articulated through "fat talk" in myriad contexts could shed light on the processes by which women negotiate status through everyday interactions, and how these negotiations damage women's status, overall.

Table 1. Real Style Sizing Chart

	Size 14	Size 16	Size 18	Size 20	Size 22	Size 24	Size 26	Size 28
Bust	40"	42"	44"	46"	48"	50"	52"	54"
Waist	34"	36"	38"	40"	42"	44"	46"	48"
Hip	42"	44"	46"	48"	50"	52"	54"	56"

Table 2. Average Clothing Size and Bust/Waist/Hip Measurements of American Women by Age and Race/Ethnic Group*

	White		Black		Hispanic	
	18-35	36-65	18-35	36-65	18-35	36-65
Size**	10/12	14/16	14/16	16/18	12/14	16/18
Bust	39.1"	41.5"	41.2"	43.5"	40.3"	43"
Waist	32.6"	35.1"	34.3"	37.4"	33.7"	36.5"
Hips	41.8"	43.9"	44"	45.9"	41.8"	43.9"

*Figures for this table are based on results of a national sizing survey (N= 6310 women) conducted by [TC]² (2004)

** Clothing size was estimated by comparing bust/waist/hip measurements to sizes indicated in Table 1.

Table 3. The Social Organization of Real Style by Size, Gender, Race, and Job

	Top Level Managers	Assistant Managers	Stock Associates	Sales Associates	Total Sample
Total Sample	4	6	3	21	34
Plus-Sized Women (N=23)					
Black	-	3	-	9	12
Latina	-	2	-	4	6
White	-	-	-	4	4
Other	-	-	-	1	1
Standard-Sized Women (N=7)					
Asian	1	-	1	-	2
Black	1	-	-	1	2
Latina	-	1	-	-	1
White	-	-	-	1	1
Other	-	-	-	1	1
Standard-Sized Men (N=4)					
Black	-	-	2	-	2
Latino	1	-	-	-	1
White	1	-	-	-	1

*The store had no plus-sized Asian/Pacific Islander women, and no plus-sized men of any race.

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Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation has focused on the relationship between physical appearance and social inequality, exploring how workplace demands for “aesthetic labor” reproduce and legitimize workplace discrimination on the bases of gender, race, class, and body size. I examined this pervasive aspect of labor market inequality across three complementary case studies, including (1) an ethnographic participant observation study of a “Successful Women’s Outfitters” office (Chapter 2); (2) an interview and content analysis study of the work of “fit models” (Chapter 3); and an ethnographic participant observation study of a women’s “plus size” clothing store (Chapter 4). Below, I provide a brief overview of the findings resulting from each empirical chapter, and then outline how the research, as a whole, offers original contributions to the field. I close with a discussion of potential future research resulting from this dissertation.

Chapter 2 examined social barriers in the hiring process through a case study of a non-profit organization that provided professional clothing and “style advice” to disadvantaged women entering the workforce. Through participant observation as a volunteer at a West Coast Dress for Success office (DFS-WC), I analyzed interactions between volunteer “personal stylists” and unemployed women in need of professional attire to examine the extent to which these interactions challenged or reproduced gendered power relations. I also drew from this data to examine whether, and how, disadvantaged women could gain access to the objectified capital (professional clothing) they needed in order to succeed in the labor market as aesthetic laborers.

I found that the middle-class volunteers and staff of DFS-WC functioned as both “street-level bureaucrats” and as taste-makers who served as gatekeepers to their clients’ access to services and goods. In doing so, they simultaneously promoted and constrained clients’ upward

mobility. Interaction between volunteers and clients were structured around organizational understandings of deserving versus undeserving poor, through which certain types of clients were rumored to more or less “picky” and more or less “deserving” of attentive service and material goods. For example, clients referred by welfare-to-work programs were seen as “difficult” because they often asked for extra clothes, but were deemed “undeserving” due to their status as welfare recipients. These clients were treated with impatience and experienced symbolic violence as volunteer personal shoppers legitimized their own tastes while dismissing their clients’. In contrast, young clients referred through youth programs and junior colleges were seen to be hard-working and upwardly mobile, and thus “easy to work with”, “fun”, and “deserving.” Further, plus-sized clients were much less likely than thinner clients to receive full interview outfits, largely due to the relative lack of donated clothing in larger sizes in comparison to the number of plus-sized clients. In these ways, judgments and stereotypes regarding clients’ *habitus* and their *bodily capital* shaped unequal access to services, thus constraining their upward mobility; despite providing a valuable service for disadvantaged women, the program reproduced and obscured social inequality across race, class, age, and body size. Although these observations revealed important insights into processes by which middle-class women participate in (or block) the transmission of cultural capital to poorer women, further research is needed to more fully understand how the women themselves understand these processes. In-depth interviews with DFS-WC staff, volunteers, and clients would help clarify the motivations, meanings, and logic behind these interactions and choices.

Chapter 3 drew on the case of female fit models, i.e., fashion workers with supposedly “perfect measurements” who try on prototype garments during the clothing production process. To analytically tease apart the bodily capital and embodied cultural capital that makes up

aesthetic labor, I compared content analyses of 77 job advertisements for fit models with data I collected through interviews with fit models and those who work with them. I found that, although a fit model's "perfect" bodily measurements were necessary at the point of hire, her job security ultimately depended on her ability to interact "professionally" with colleagues. Thus, even in jobs with seemingly exacting aesthetic standards, interactional mannerisms – which are largely shaped by women's class and cultural backgrounds – can protect workers when their bodily capital diminishes. Further, my interview data and observations of "fit sessions" at two fashion firms suggested that plus-size female fit models may actually enjoy greater job protection than standard-sized fit models, a finding that is surprising given that plus-sized women are generally stigmatized and experience discrimination in the workplace. That said, this last finding may be specific to the West Coast city in which the interviewees worked. Thus, a valuable next step in this vein of research would be to broaden this inquiry to include a larger sample size of interview subjects, by increasing the number of fit models interviewed, and by accessing those working in additional fashion markets, particularly New York City, which houses the "fashion capital" of the United States.

Drawing on participant observation at a women's plus-size clothing store, Chapter 4 examined how mainstream beauty standards, body-accepting store branding, and customers' feeling rules shaped service interactions, and expectations for aesthetic labor. Despite store branding that promoted prideful appreciation for "real" bodies, clients' internalization of mainstream anti-fat stigma caused the site to be marked by ambivalence toward – not acceptance of celebration of – women's larger body sizes. Here, hierarchies between women were reified rather than challenged. For example, workers experienced gender segregation of jobs, and thinner employees were privileged with special tasks. I also found that both managers and White

(but not Black or Latina) customers used body-disparaging “fat talk” to elicit workers’ emotional labor while punishing thinner workers for defying the expectation that they should be plus-sized. Here, this research articulates the nuanced relationship between workers’ aesthetic capacities – their bodily capital – and their ability to successfully provide emotional labor. While some psychologists describe “fat talk” as mundane and harmless, I argue that it is better understood as a discursive means by which women interactively reinforce status distinctions between each other. This research drew attention to the extent to which a worker’s bodily capital constrains her ability to provide not only aesthetic labor, but also emotional labor. A compelling avenue for further research on aesthetic labor would be to focus more closely on the question of which physical characteristics are most meaningful in different workplaces, and how multiple traits of both workers and clients intersect during service interactions.

Several lines of inquiry remained consistent across all of these chapters, revealing important contributions of this work and suggesting valuable avenues for further research. These include (1) my core interest in understanding how organizational expectations for aesthetic labor reproduce and/or challenge social inequality, and (2) a foregrounding of body size as a form of oppression that intersects with gender, race, and class. Below I outline my unique theoretical contributions to the field, based on these lines of inquiry.

My focus on the social processes through which organizations expectations for workers’ aesthetic labor shape social inequality led to my original conceptualization of aesthetic labor as being made up of a worker’s *bodily capital*, *objectified cultural capital*, and her *habitus/embodied cultural capital*. Previous research on aesthetic has labor engaged in Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital and its transmission at arm’s length, leaving gaps in understanding in regards to embodied capacities and attributes. As outlined in the introduction

chapter, and as illustrated throughout the empirical chapters, my conceptualization provides needed analytical leverage for understanding the nuances of aesthetic labor, including how people acquire it, the social processes – and social relationships – through which it can be improved or refined, and the extent to which each form of aesthetic capital may be more or less important across different jobs, tasks, or stages in a worker’s career. Future research on aesthetic labor seeking to answer these types of questions will benefit from using this framework and by refining its usefulness.

Additionally, by foregrounding body size as a source of gendered, classed, and racialized oppression, my data reveal new insights into how size stigma shapes people’s lives and contributes to inequality. It is not a new assertion that larger body size is not the result of, but rather a cause of, poverty. Previous research argues that widespread stigma and sizeist workplace discrimination are the mechanisms through which fatness is impoverishing. My research supports these earlier findings while also offering a new contribution for understanding this process. I argue that the relationship between body size and socioeconomic status is also the result of limited access to objectified cultural capital (i.e., well-fitting professional clothing) and to spatial obstacles in workplaces (i.e., being unable to physically fit into workspaces, such as the display windows in a retail stores). If sociologists are to fully incorporate understandings of the corporeal body into our research, it is necessary that we also consider how bodies are structured by not only our symbolic world, but also our material world.